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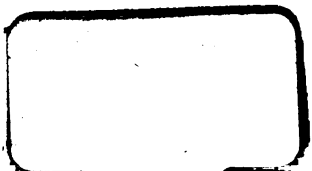
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THIRLBY HALL

THIRLBY HALL

A Novel

BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF 'MATRIMONY,' 'NO NEW THING,' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOLUME III.

LONDON

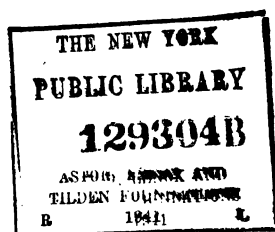
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THIRLBY HALL.

CHAPTER I.

LADY CONSTANCE TESTS THE EXTENT OF MY FOLLY.

THE first person whom I saw on arriving at my rooms in London was Harry ; and the first thing that Harry said was, "So you have been down at the old place ! Why didn't you tell me that you were going ?"

He spoke with a perceptible degree of eagerness and impatience, and I saw at once that I should have to tell him what had taken me home. "Oh, I ran down for a couple of nights," I said. "Was there any reason for my informing all my friends of my movements ?"

"None whatever," answered Harry ; "but I have had an uncomfortable sort of feeling that

you might have spoken about me to my father. I hope you didn't do that."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I did," said I. "I am sorry if you are angry about it," I added, noticing the flush which overspread Harry's pale cheeks; "but I acted for the best; I thought it could do no sort of harm to say that I had seen you."

"I am not angry," Harry declared; "but I am a little annoyed, I confess. From one point of view, your having spoken will have done neither harm nor good; because, as I have told you times out of mind, my father will never be influenced one way or the other by anything that you can say of me; but, though you may not have injured my prospects, you have hurt my pride. Perhaps you think I have no right to lay claim to such an article of luxury."

He was walking up and down the room with quick, impatient steps, and for a minute or two I thought he was going to quarrel with me. But presently his ordinary serenity returned to him, and he threw himself down into an arm-chair, laughing good-humouredly. "I know you meant well," he said; "and it can't be helped. I wish

you hadn't done it, that's all. I need not ask how my father received your advances on my behalf. Of course he snubbed you."

"Not exactly that," I answered; "but I must admit that he was not very encouraging."

"And no doubt he accused me of having instigated you to make this unwise attempt."

This again I was unable to deny; and Harry continued: "You see now that, supposing I had a little pride left, I might not altogether like such accusations being brought against me. But, after all, I don't care!—what does it signify? At least this will have the effect, I hope, of convincing you that you had better submit to the inevitable; and the inevitable has been known to take worse forms than that of an unencumbered estate.

"I don't consider myself beaten yet," I said; "I still think you have a chance. Indeed, he told me so himself."

"What chance?" inquired Harry, with an ironical smile.

"Well, he said that if you could distinguish yourself——"

"Oh, the old story! I wonder he doesn't

say that he will be prepared to shake hands with me as soon as ever I am appointed Archbishop of Canterbury. Suppose we talk about something else. Have you seen Lady Constance since your return ?”

“Of course not. I drove straight here from the station.”

“When you do see her, you may as well tell her what you have been about these last few days. I think she will consider it good news. Don’t look so indignant ; it is good news for her and good news for you. Come ! I’ll go a little further, and say that it’s good news for me too —though, to be sure, I can hardly call it news. I wish you would believe that I don’t want Thirlby any more than I want the Archbishopric of Canterbury. I should like you to have Thirlby, I should like you to marry Lady Constance ; and I should like a little more money for myself. I believe that pretty nearly expresses the sum of my earthly desires. No ; there’s one more thing that I should like. I should like, if it were in the least possible, to make my father understand that I am not using you as a cat’s-paw to draw my chestnuts out of the fire. They aren’t my

chestnuts any more ; and if I had a hankering after them, I should prefer burning my own fingers to letting you burn yours. But it would be asking too much to ask him to believe that."

"I am afraid," said I, penitently, "that I have made rather an ass of myself."

"To be quite frank with you," answered Harry, laughing, "I think you have. However, if Lady Constance doesn't think so, it matters very little what anybody else may think."

I had an opportunity of ascertaining Lady Constance's views upon the subject the same evening, when I met her at a large party at the Foreign Office. She was dressed with more than usual magnificence : she wore a necklace and spray of diamonds which must have been worth a small fortune ; and, as she ascended the broad staircase, with a cloud of satellites about her, I thought I had never seen her looking to greater advantage. The distinguished statesman who at that time presided over the Department of Foreign Affairs paid her marked attention ; exalted political personages elbowed one another to get near her ; she seemed quite unapproachable by so humble an individual as myself. It was, there-

fore, with a thrill of gratified pride that I saw her, after a time, detach herself unceremoniously from the group with which she had been engaged in conversation, and make straight for the corner whence I had been admiring her from afar.

"You may take me through the rooms if you like," said she, placing her hand lightly upon my arm. - "You have been following my advice, and visiting your relations, I hear."

"How did you know that?" I asked, as we moved on through the crowd.

"Oh! the well-informed Chapman, as usual. He called yesterday and told me that you had gone down to Norfolk. I think even that he called for the purpose of telling me; for he had very little else to say, and he is not one of the people whom I generally receive on Sundays. By the way, what is this singular Chapman? Is he a phenomenon, do you suppose, or a humbug?"

Feeling myself upon dangerous ground, I only returned cautiously, "How do you mean!"

"He must be the one or the other. If he is a disinterested friend of yours, he is a phenome-

non ; if he isn't—which is a great deal more likely—he is playing some game that I don't understand.”

“I believe,” I answered, “that you may give him credit for being disinterested. I suppose you say this because he has been good-naturedly trying to dispose you a little in my favour.”

“There was no necessity for that. What he is trying to do, in the most open and undisguised way, is to convince me that I should do well to marry you instead of Mr. Sotheran. I can't say that he has succeeded, so far ; but I rather enjoy his coolness.

“I wish I had half his audacity !” I sighed.

“You have a fairly good supply of your own, I think ; half Mr. Sotheran's income would be a good deal more to the purpose. Does it make you any happier to know that I would marry you to-morrow if you had ten thousand a year !”

“I am not sure that it does,” I answered. “That is only equivalent to saying that you would marry anybody who had ten thousand a year.”

“Not exactly anybody,” she returned composedly ; “there are some people from whom I

should require at least double that price. What a foolish fellow you are!" she went on. "I am several years older than you; I am neither pretty nor good; I hold some odd opinions, and I have not always the courage of them—how thankful you ought to be that you have not ten thousand a year!"

"You are yourself," I said. "All the rest means nothing to me—even if it were true. You are quite right to call me a fool; but my folly is all that I care to live for." And then I broke out into passionate phrases which I don't care to reproduce at this time of day, and to which Lady Constance paid very little heed.

"How far would your folly carry you?" she asked all of a sudden. "Far enough to lead you into doing something really foolish to serve me?"

"Try me!" I cried eagerly. "The more difficult and the more dangerous it is, the better I shall be pleased."

"Oh," said Lady Constance, with a short laugh, "I am not going to ask you to slay a dragon; my requirements are much more commonplace. Perhaps some other time I may tell you what they are. Meanwhile, here comes an elderly

relative of yours to save me from falling into bathos."

I followed the direction of her glance, and became aware of the General bearing down upon us with a countenance irradiated by smiles. He took Lady Constance's hand, bowed over it, gave it a perceptible squeeze, and then favoured me with a slap on the shoulder.

"You're a nice fellow, Charley!" said he; "what do you mean by never letting me know you were in town? Too busy dancing attendance upon the ladies, eh? Ah, Lady Constance, these young gentlemen cut us out in all directions; but they're not to be trusted, take my word for it. Here to-day and off to-morrow—butterfly business, you know. If you want a steady, respectful adoration, warranted to last, you must go to the middle-aged division. I'm middle-aged myself," he added modestly; "so I ought to know."

But Lady Constance had already turned her back upon us, and was conversing with a dignitary of the Church, whose arm she presently took. As she moved away she looked over her shoulder and said to me, "You are going on to Brentford

House later, I suppose," in a tone which seemed rather to imply a command than a question.

The General, I think, was a trifle put out at being so cavalierly treated. He twirled his moustache and remarked, "Good-looking woman, Lady Constance; but I don't know that I altogether like that very abrupt manner, do you? Goes in a little too much for eccentricity—show off—trying to make people open their eyes, and all that kind of thing, you know. She is only marching that poor old Bishop down the room now to get him into a row with his wife. Women are a queer lot. All very well to laugh and chaff with them; but it don't do to let them get the whip hand of you, according to my experience. Put that in your pipe and smoke it, Master Charley."

The Duchess of Brentford was giving a great ball that evening, to which all London had been bidden, and I among the rest. Thither I now repaired, in obedience to Lady Constance's hint, and there, very soon after my arrival, I came upon the object of my search. She saw me at once; but it did not please her to take any immediate notice of me, and while I was patiently

awaiting her summons, I was led away and made to dance. When I was free again, which was only after a considerable interval, I was unable to discover her; and so it was not until early morning that she suddenly appeared at my elbow and told me that she wished to be taken down to the garden.

The Duke of Brentford, as everybody knows, inhabits a big isolated house, with pleasure-grounds attached to it which, for London, may be called extensive. These had been prettily decorated with Chinese lanterns, and, as the night was warm, a good many people were strolling over the grass, or lounging in the marquee which had been stretched outside the ground-floor windows. Lady Constance seated herself upon a vacant bench, made room for me beside her, and—— “Let me see,” said she; “where did we leave off? Hadn’t you been protesting that you were consumed with a desire to do something, possible or impossible, to serve me?”

“Whatever I said I meant it.”

“Very likely. Well, I am going to put your devotion to the proof. Do you like asking favours? I suppose not. No one does; although

most of us have to come to it at one time or another of our lives. And perhaps it is just as well that such necessities should arise; because there are very few other ways that I know of by which one can so easily find out what one's friends are worth. The lady in the ballad who flung down her glove among the lions and told her lover to fetch it, must have had a moment of real happiness when she saw him drop down into the arena. Why he should have behaved in the brutal manner he did afterwards I never could understand. No doubt he had sworn heaps of times that he was ready to die for her; and what business had he to lose his temper, and throw her glove in her face, when she took him at his word? You will say that he never meant his precious skin to be put in jeopardy out of mere wantonness; but I can't admit his right to make reservations. The moral of the tale is, that it is a very foolish thing to accept vows literally."

"I make no reservations," I declared. "If you want me to jump over London Bridge, you have only to say the word. I'll do anything that you tell me to do; and I can't claim much credit

for it either ; because you can *make* me do anything."

"Really !—anything ?" she repeated, with an odd smile. "I wonder how you feel now—or rather how you will feel presently ! Suppose I were to ask for Mr. Sotheran's head upon a charger ?"

"Well, then I should have to refuse. I forgot to say that I must draw the line at crime."

"Come, we are getting on," observed Lady Constance ; "I thought we should hear of some reservations presently. Do you draw the line, for instance, at carrying a letter to Warsaw which will certainly bring about your death, if the police catch you with it in your possession ?"

"No," I answered ; "I'll do that gladly."

"But I don't want you to carry a letter to Warsaw, as it happens."

"Would you mind," I asked mildly, "telling me what you do want of me ?"

"Yes," she replied, laughing and sighing ; "I mind very much ; but I'll tell you, nevertheless. I want you to raise a couple of thousand pounds for me. Now, are you disgusted ?"

Shall I confess that I was ? In the abstract

there seems to be no reason why a lady to whom you have just sworn unquestioning obedience should not ask for your money as much as your life ; yet I suppose that no one can receive such a demand without at the same time experiencing a disagreeable shock. You may accept anything from your friend but his money. You may drink his costliest wines, you may smoke his choicest cigars, you may work his horses, his carriages, and his servants, and feel no overwhelming sense of obligation ; but you would be equally astonished and displeased if he offered to pay your railway fare. In some houses one finds a box of postage stamps on one's writing-table ; but I imagine that few people make use of them. For my own part, I always have an uncomfortable dread that the housemaid will abstract them after my departure, and that I shall be held responsible. This, no doubt, is a highly artificial sort of scrupulousness ; but we live under artificial conditions of society. As Mrs. Gamp justly observes : " We are born into a wale, we were brought up in a wale, and we must take the consequences of such a sitiuation." Therefore, since I am no more philosophical than my neighbours,

and since at that time I desired to think of Lady Constance as being, in certain respects, very superior to hers, I wished with all my heart that she had asked me for anything else. However, I made shift to conceal my feelings, and said cheerfully, "Is that all?"

"That," answered Lady Constance drily, "is all. Observe, please, that I am not asking you to *lend* me this sum; where truth is possible, I always prefer to employ it. I may repay you in a month or two; but I may not be able to repay you at all. In the meantime, I hope you understand that I have paid you a compliment in making this request, if I never pay you anything else."

I said I understood that thoroughly, and thanked her; after which there was a pause.

"Perhaps," resumed Lady Constance by-and-by, "you may think it rather odd that I should be in such straits; but it is hardly worth while to enter into explanations. As a matter of fact, I am so short of ready money just now that I am actually in danger of getting into trouble with the butcher and baker. It may be only a temporary difficulty, but it is an unpleasantly real one."

I could not help glancing at the magnificent diamonds that she wore: and she immediately read my thoughts. "All paste!" she whispered behind her fan. "See what a sham I am, in spite of my love of truth! Nevertheless I have a sort of excuse. These jewels are assumed to dazzle the butcher and baker, who will hear of them through the servants; they are not intended to delude you, nor society at large, whose opinion is of less importance for the moment."

Then she rose abruptly and yawned with unfeigned weariness. "Oh, how tired I am!" she exclaimed. "Will you go and look for my carriage, please? And don't come and see me for two or three days—I am going to have one of my attacks of suicidal mania."





CHAPTER II.

HARRY HAS A LITTLE SURPRISE.

AFTER I had helped Lady Constance into her brougham, I walked slowly back to Sloane Street in the gray light of the summer morning. The sun had already risen by the time that I reached my rooms, and I was so hopelessly broad awake that it was ridiculous to think of going to bed. I dropped into an arm-chair, lighted a cigar, and reflected over all that had passed during the night. I was not altogether satisfied. There was a certain vulgarity about the service which I was required to perform. Like Naaman the Syrian, I should have been better pleased if I had been asked to do some great thing; and an idea of the extreme juvenility of my temperament at that epoch may be gathered from the fact that I spent a good hour in idle imaginings and introspections be-

fore I realised that the raising of £2000 would not, after all, be a task of the easiest kind. In fact, upon further consideration, I didn't in the least see how the thing was to be done. Unfortunately, the small capital which I had inherited was left, under my father's will, in the hands of trustees until I should have reached the age of five-and-twenty, and was, consequently, not available; to ask my uncle to advance me the sum was out of the question; and of the ways and requirements of money-lenders I knew next to nothing. It seemed tolerably clear, however, that I should have to seek out some accommodating Hebrew now. The questions were—Where was I to go, and What security was it in my power to offer?

In this strait I bethought me of Harry, whose experience would in all probability prove equal to the emergency, and I determined to consult him forthwith. He had given me his address—Clarence Cottage, Richmond Hill—as I had often occasion to send him a note, and it now occurred to me that I could not spend a fine morning better than by riding down to see him. It was true that he had expressed a strong

objection to my doing this ; but I thought, nevertheless, that I would chance his displeasure and go. I did not want to lose time, and probably he would be good-natured enough to pardon my intrusion in consideration of the pressing nature of my errand.

After taking a bath and changing my clothes, I walked round to the stables, where I saddled my horse, to the astonishment of the sleepy helper, who was the only man about, and rode away westward, enjoying

“The world of pleasant sounds and sights
That vanish with the dew.”

I jogged along easily through Hammersmith and Barnes to Wimbledon, and by indulging my horse with a gallop over the common and taking a circuitous route across Richmond Park, managed to put off the time until nine o'clock ; by which hour Harry would, I presumed, be ready to receive an early visitor. From what he had told me, I imagined that Clarence Cottage was situated in a back slum, and was, therefore, pleasantly surprised when the policeman, to whom I applied for information, pointed out to me a pretty little rustic dwelling, over-

grown with creepers and standing in a small garden. Having reconnoitred the position, I rode away to stable my horse, and presently returned on foot.

“Chapman?” said the maid-servant who opened the door for me. “You’ve come to the wrong house, sir; this is Mr. Le Marchant’s.”

“Le Marchant, to be sure!” cried I, with much presence of mind; “I shall forget my own name next! Mr. Le Marchant is at home, I suppose?”

“Who should I say, sir?” asked the young woman, who may perhaps have had some acquaintance with the importunities of duns.

“Oh, it’s all right,” I answered impatiently; for I could hear the cheerful clatter of plates in a room on the right of the entrance, where Harry was evidently breakfasting. I pushed past her, knocked at the door, and, without waiting for permission, popped my head in, saying jocosely, “I’ve run you to earth, you see. I hope I haven’t been indiscreet——”

The remainder of my sentence died away upon my lips, and I stood gaping foolishly in the doorway; for the enormity of my in-

discretion was now startlingly apparent. Harry in a shooting-coat and slippers; was sitting at the head of the breakfast-table; opposite to him, behind the urn and the tea-cups, was a lady of commanding presence—tall, rather stout, rather handsome, with a pair of bold black eyes; while immediately facing me was a little fair-haired boy, who broke the awful stillness by remarking placidly, “Here’s a go!”

For the first moment or two I think Harry was as much put out of countenance as I was myself; but he rallied quickly. “The murder’s out,” he said, with a smile. “Charley, let me introduce you to my wife. Paulina—Mr. Maxwell. Jimmy, this is your cousin Charles, already known to you by report. You had better go and say ‘How do you do?’ to him.”

The lady behind the urn rose majestically, and made me a sort of stage curtsy, accompanied by an unnatural smile and one of those killing glances which are seldom seen except beyond the footlights. “This is, indeed, an unexpected honour!” she said.

“What a truly awful woman!” I thought to myself; but, on the other hand, I felt an im-

mediate liking for the quaint little mortal who slid off his chair, trotted round the table, and held out his hand to me. It was evident that the humour of the scene was perceptible to Jimmy, and that he was enjoying it. His lips were tightly compressed, a dimple had formed itself on his cheek, and his blue eyes were dancing with subdued merriment.

"Why didn't you tell us you were coming?" he asked, with an air of great innocence.

Harry laughed, and I laughed too, which set us both a little more at our ease; but Mrs. Harry called out in a disagreeable, husky voice, "James, go back to your place, sir, and finish your breakfast. He's a spoilt boy, Mr. Maxwell, I am sorry to say. His father does so indulge him that he has no timidity, like a child ought to have. Now let me assist you to some ham and a cup of tea. Or would you like something stronger? I believe there's spirits in the house. Harry, why don't you offer your cousin a brandy-and-soda?"

I didn't dare to raise my eyes from my plate. What poor Harry's feelings must be I could well imagine; though his self-possession enabled

him to make the best of a very uncomfortable situation. The others had already finished their breakfast; I swallowed mine with all possible despatch; and, as soon as I had done, Harry, to my great relief, said, "Perhaps you would like to take a turn round the garden with me now. —We are going to talk business, Paulina, and I dare say Charley will not see you again before he goes."

Mrs. Le Marchant was kind enough to take this hint. "Delighted to have made your acquaintance, Mr. Maxwell," said she; and, with another sweeping curtsy, she retired, dragging the reluctant Jimmy after her.

"I don't think this quite fair play, Charley," said Harry, when we were left in sole possession of the dining-room.

"My dear fellow," I answered, "I assure you I wouldn't have come here for the world if I had had the slightest idea that I shouldn't find you alone; but how could I guess that you were a married man? I never even dreamt of such a thing!"

Harry looked at me keenly. "Well," he said at last, "I believe you."

"Hang it all!" I exclaimed, with some indignation; "you don't suppose I should tell a lie about it, do you?"

He laughed. "No," he answered, "I don't think you tell lies; but, mind you, there are precious few people in the world of whom I should venture to say that. I don't suspect you of meaning to steal a march upon me; but, whether you meant it or not, that is what you have done. You are in the position of a man who has overheard something that he was not intended to hear. He can either take advantage of his discovery or he can dismiss it from his mind. A good many people—I myself, for example—would probably adopt the former course; others would consider that their duty as gentlemen obliged them to adopt the latter. I should think that you were one of the others."

"Well," I replied, "I suppose I am; but at the same time I can't see why you should wish to be so mysterious. I suppose that—lady is your wife?"

"Yes; that—lady is my wife," answered Harry, mimicking my momentary hesitation.

“Which, I should think, will sufficiently explain my desire for mystery.”

This was a little awkward. I shifted my ground, and asked, “Have you been long married?”

“Twelve years,” answered Harry, with a sigh. “Jimmy’s just turned eleven. Poor little beggar! I sometimes wish he had never been born. Now I suppose you would like to hear who my wife was, and all that.”

“If you don’t mind telling me,” I answered.

“I can’t say that I much enjoy talking about it; but since you know now that I am married, you may as well know the rest. Paulina, as you can see for yourself, is not of aristocratic origin. In fact, she was a barmaid. Her father, who, I am glad to say, is dead, kept a public-house at Newmarket, and it was there that I first made her acquaintance ever so long ago—before my *fiasco* came. Afterwards, when I was awfully down on my luck, and hadn’t a soul in the world to exchange a word with, she used to be kind to me, and I was grateful; and so—so the natural stupid consequence followed. If, by any stretch of fancy, you can imagine yourself a dog

with a tin kettle tied to his tail, you may guess what your feelings would be towards the person who took the dreadful thing off for you. Paulina couldn't quite do that; but sometimes she made me forget my tin kettle. I declare," exclaimed Harry, bringing his hand down with a resounding slap upon the table, "that if she had been as old and ugly as Sycorax, instead of being, what she was at that time, a remarkably handsome young woman, I would have married her, and thanked her for taking me!"

"And quite right, too," cried I, with generous enthusiasm. "I admire you for having done as you did."

"You are very flattering," answered Harry drily; "but I don't advise you to display flattery in its sincerest form. A man who marries beneath him pretty generally makes a grievous mistake; and though it is open to you to retort that I couldn't well marry beneath me in one sense, I could, and did, in another. As Paulina is my wife, it would perhaps be in better taste not to criticise her: but, strictly between ourselves, I may whisper to you that she has certain small defects."

I said I was sorry for that.

"So am I sorry," rejoined Harry. "So is Jimmy. Jimmy don't like having his ears boxed, and I myself have a weakness for a quiet life ; whereas Paulina prefers a stormy one. However, what can't be cured must be endured. Do you begin to understand now why I have so little ambition to see my father kill the fatted calf ? And do you also perceive why I am unable to go and fight the Russians ?"

"Yes," I said ; "I see that you couldn't have enlisted ; but I believe you are wrong about my uncle. He has distinctly told me several times that if you married and had a son, he should reconsider the question of your right to inherit Thirlby."

Harry was evidently struck for a moment. He changed colour, and seemed to breathe more quickly. "You never told me this before," he said.

"Didn't I ? I thought I had. Anyhow, so it is ; and I hope you'll lose no time in letting him know the truth. If all goes well, I shall meet you and your wife at Thirlby before the summer is over."

Harry burst into a laugh. "I beg your pardon," said he; "but really the idea of Paulina at Thirlby was too comical. For the hundredth time, my dear Charley, let me assure you that my troubles are past mending. You can't seriously suppose that my father would consent to sit down to dinner with Paulina, and I don't care to go where my wife would not be received."

"What nonsense!—of course she would be received," I said; but I couldn't help thinking that, though my uncle might consent to receive his son's wife, he would hardly be able to stand her company long. "It isn't a question of your taking up your permanent abode at Thirlby," I added, not very felicitously.

"Happily, it is not," observed Harry. "Nor is it even a question of our taking up our temporary abode there. Many thanks, Charley; but, all things considered, I prefer my crust of bread and liberty."

"That is all very well," said I; "but do you think you have any right to ruin your son?"

Harry's face softened. "Poor little chap!" he muttered. "You have no idea, Charley, what

a clever child that is—as sharp as a needle, and the most independent young rascal you ever saw. He'd think nothing of walking off to the station all by himself and taking his ticket for London. Sometimes he swears he'll do it when his mother has one of her little fits of temper on."

"What are you going to do with him?" I asked. "You will have to send him to school one of these days, I suppose."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose so; but he is young yet, and small for his age. I have taught him to read and write, but, barring those accomplishments, he is as ignorant as a savage."

At this moment the subject of our remarks strolled towards us across the garden, whither we had betaken ourselves, and Harry called out:

"Jimmy, my boy, do you know that your cousin has been telling me I shall have to send you to school before long? What do you think of that?"

Jimmy, after considering the question for a short space, replied, "Well, he shouldn't mind,

if it was a school where there was no whipping."

"Gets enough of that at home, by George!" muttered Harry under his breath.

I took upon myself to assure Jimmy that it was only naughty boys who were whipped at school, and expressed a hope that he was not a naughty boy; to which he replied that he was not. He then approached me more closely, did me the honour to examine my watch and chain, and, after making further personal investigations, inquired where I lived. This gave me an opening by which I felt that I ought to profit, and I answered that at present I had rooms in London; but that when I was at home I lived down in the country, at a place where there was any amount of fishing, sea and fresh water bathing, trees admirably adapted for juvenile climbers, and a well-stocked kitchen-garden. "Wouldn't you like to come and see me there?" I asked.

Jimmy nodded. "All right," he said, with business-like promptitude; "when shall I come?"

The very next time that Sunday falls in the middle of the week," interrupted his father, hastily. "Now, young 'un, be off, and tell the

cook to give your cousin an eatable luncheon, if she can."

I explained that the cook need not be troubled on my account, as I must return to London directly. "I only came down to consult you about something" I said, "and I have overstayed my time as it is." And then, as Jimmy sauntered away, with his hands in his pockets, I added, "Now, Harry, surely you can't be so hard-hearted and so wrong-headed as to deprive that poor boy of his own!"

He looked at me from beneath his eyelids with a curious expression. "You surprise me," he said; "you really do surprise me. I am bound to believe that you are sincere; but in all my experience I never met a man so confoundedly eager to ruin himself."

"In the first place," I answered, "I shall not ruin myself at all; because my uncle won't leave me unprovided for; and, in the second place, I have a superstition that ill-gotten gains never bring luck. Do be sensible, and make up your mind to write home at once."

For a moment Harry seemed to waver. He remained silent, frowning intently at the ground

and buried in thought. But presently he shook his head and threw himself back in his chair, exclaiming half angrily, "No; it won't do!—it's out of the question—it never could be worked. It sounds devilish ungrateful, I know; but I wish to Heaven you would let my affairs alone!"

He spoke with a good deal of agitation, and I flattered myself that I had moved him; though it might be more polite to say nothing further just then. "Anyhow, you'll think it over," I urged.

"Yes," he answered impatiently, "I'll think it over; only you must not worry me, and you will be kind enough to remember that you are really bound in honour to secrecy this time. Now, for goodness sake, let us drop the subject. You said you wanted to consult me about something."

"Yes; I thought you might be able to give me a hint as to the best way of raising a little ready money. I have to find £2000 as quickly as possible, and I know no more how to set about it than a baby. I suppose there are people who would accommodate me, are there not?"

"Heaps of people," answered Harry; the only thing is that they won't do it very cheaply. Solomons is about as good a man as any of them;—that's to say he isn't a greater thief than most. But if it is a question of paying tradesmen, I should strongly advise you to let it alone. They'll give you credit for a year or two, and, if they are at all decent people, they won't charge you interest, don't you see?"

"It isn't a question of paying tradespeople," I answered; "it's—it's—in point of fact, it's a rather pressing call that has been made upon me."

Harry raised his eyebrows, and stroked his moustache meditatively. Then a light seemed suddenly to break in upon him, and he smiled. "Allow me to congratulate you, Charley," said he. "I don't know what idea you may have formed of Lady Constance Milner; many people would tell you that she isn't the woman to stick at a trifle. But I have known her, off and on, for a good many years, and I have no hesitation in saying that she would not have allowed you the privilege of helping her out of a hole unless she had made up her mind to allow you other privileges eventually."

I was not by any means equally sure of this. and I was vexed with myself for having so stupidly let out what I ought to have been most careful to conceal. "I said nothing about Lady Constance Milner," I remarked coldly, knowing, nevertheless, that this disclaimer was not likely to carry much conviction with it.

"To be sure you didn't," Harry agreed, with a slight smile. "What you want this money for is to make a remunerative investment in the Savings Bank; that is understood. Still, if you had required it for Lady Constance, I think I should have had good reason to congratulate you. As it is, permit me to withdraw my congratulations, and to come to the point. Well; Solomons will let you have the two thousand I have no doubt; only you will have to pay something like two thousand five hundred for it, you know, and the question is, will you be in a position to do that some six months hence?"

I was obliged to confess that I saw no reason at all for supposing that I should.

"H'm—you can't sell out any principal?"

"Not yet awhile, unfortunately."

"And you wouldn't like to apply to my father, I suppose."

"Not upon any consideration whatever!"

"Ah! And yet it looks very much as if you would have to apply to him in the long run. See here, Charley; you need not trust me unless you like, and if you only want me to give you the addresses of a few money-lenders, of course I can do that, and say no more about it. But if you would allow me to speak to you as one friend may to another, I would try to advise you to the best of my ability."

"Well," I said, after a moment's consideration, "I should be very much obliged to you if you would advise me. There isn't much use in my pretending that the money is not for Lady Constance."

"Then," said Harry, "I will put the case before you plainly as it appears to me. I think you have just two alternatives. The first is to tell Lady Constance point-blank that you can't find the money, and take your chance of what may follow. What *will* follow will almost certainly be that she will marry our friend Sotheran before the end of the season; and that might be the very best solution of the difficulty, so far as

you are concerned—I don't say it wouldn't. Nevertheless, as I have told you before, I shall be sorry if it comes to that. Your second alternative is to tell my father that you have an urgent necessity for a couple of thousand pounds, at the same time requesting him either to deduct that sum from what he may propose to leave you at his death, or to let it stand over until you can dispose of your own fortune. He won't ask you what you want it for."

"Neither alternative will do," I answered. "The first is not worth discussing, and I couldn't face the second. My uncle wouldn't ask for explanations, perhaps; but I should have to give them, all the same."

"I am sorry," said Harry, "that my imagination is not equal to the discovery of a third course. You haven't a stud of hunters or a valuable picture or two to dispose of, unfortunately."

"I tell you what," I said, struck by a sudden thought; "I have some jewels at the banker's which used to belong to my mother, and which are worth a good lot of money, I believe. I might just as well sell them. The idea was that they were to go to my wife; but I am not bound

in any way, and as it is in the last degree improbable that I shall ever marry, I sha'n't feel that I am defrauding that mythical lady by parting with them."

"Upon my word I don't think you could do better," said Harry meditatively. "Does my father know of the existence of these jewels? Of course he does, though."

"Yes ; but he need never know that they are not lying safely at the bank. What a fool I was not to think of this before !"

I could not help regretting a little now that I had unnecessarily taken Harry into my confidence ; and he did not lessen this regret by remarking, with a smile, "There is a certain appropriateness about the arrangement, too. Lady Constance will get her money instead of her diamonds, that's all. Moreover, when you tell her what you have done, she will feel a great deal more bound to you—that is, unless she is very unlike other women—than she would have felt if you had raised the money in a more expensive and troublesome way. So that you will score all round."

"Good gracious me !" I exclaimed, in some disgust, "you don't suppose that I am going to

tell her anything about it, do you ? Of course I don't want her to think herself under the smallest obligation to me."

"I am justly rebuked," said Harry ; "but really you must not look for delicacy of feeling in me. The bloom was rubbed off the peach a great many years ago, and I confess that I can't even understand now why a man should disdain to take his profit out of circumstances. However, I dare say you are right, and I am glad you will not need to trouble Solomons."

Soon afterwards I got up to go, and Harry accompanied me through the cottage, where we encountered Mrs. Le Marchant, looking somewhat flushed and perturbed. From the anxious manner in which she scrutinised us, I fancied that she was in doubt whether to regard me as a friend or an enemy ; so to make her mind easy I said, "I hope you will allow me to call upon you again, some day, now that we have become acquainted. I should like to see more of my friend Jimmy too."

"Well, I'm sure you're very kind," she answered, glancing dubiously at her husband, who said—

"Oh, come if you choose, Charley, and if the

Foreign Office can spare you. I trust you implicitly not to reveal the existence of Paulina and Jimmy; and as for myself, you know it is always a treat to me to have a visit from you."

"Indeed, sir, I think it would do him good if you was to come sometimes," said Mrs. Le Marchant, suddenly dropping her fine-lady manner and speaking quite naturally and humbly. "He don't see many friends."

"Then you may expect me very soon," answered I, shaking hands with them both. I turned to look at them as I unfastened the garden-gate, and my heart was filled with compassion for them. Poor flushed Paulina, with her hand resting upon her husband's shoulder; Harry, pale and listless, leaning in the doorway—there was a whole drama in that little vignette of a coarse, loving, passionate woman and a weary man who has outlived love and passion, who only asks for peace and is disgusted by outbreaks which he unconsciously arouses. A drama which has been enacted by thousands of couples in all ranks of life since the world began, and which will continue to be enacted, one may suppose, till the end of the chapter.



CHAPTER III.

MR. SOTHERAN FIGHTS AND RUNS AWAY.

THE next day I went down to Yarmouth and got my jewels from the bank, where they had lain hid for so many years. By good luck, I met with no acquaintances in the course of my hurried visit to the town; but I must have had a narrow escape of making the return journey to London in company that would have been a little embarrassing; for, on reaching Sloane Street, I found a note from George Warren, telling me that he had only that afternoon left home to join the ship which was to take him to Sydney.

"I need not say how sorry I am not to shake hands with you before I start," George wrote. "I thought I should be able to manage it, but there was a hurry at the last moment; and so here I am on board ship, and expecting to be

down the river by early morning. Of course, when I saw you the other day, I had no idea of sailing so soon. The opportunity came, however, and it was best in every way to profit by it. I think you will be glad to hear that Miss Dennison and I parted friends, and that she has promised to write to me sometimes. She was very kind" . . . (here a few lines were carefully erased). "I suppose you and most other people would think friendship a poor substitute for love; but I don't look at it in that way. I don't want to lose *everything*, you see."

The letter concluded with some warmer professions of regard than George generally allowed himself to use. It made me very sorry to think that I should see his kind, honest face no more till years had altered it, and I folded up his letter with a rather heavy heart. In this world of change and compensation acquaintances, friends, lovers even, come and go; vacant places are filled, and profit and loss balance up against one another as the years roll by; but the friend of one's boyhood can never be replaced. I had several engagements for that night; but I neglected them all, and went early to bed, where

I lay awake for some time, meditating upon the contrariness of things.

However, I fell asleep at length, and when morning came, I had the best antidote for sorrow in the shape of a multiplicity of duties, not the least of which was the speedy converting of my jewels into coin. In order to effect this, I thought my wisest course would be to address myself to the old-fashioned, but highly respectable jewellers with whom our family had had dealings for many years, and I accordingly drove to Bond Street as soon as I had finished my breakfast.

Old Mr. Jacobson, the senior partner of the firm of Jacobson and Lawson, received me in a dark little parlour behind his shop, and examined with interest the glittering contents of my leather boxes, which made a sufficiently imposing show when spread out upon velvet.

"Do I understand you that you wish to *sell* these family jewels, sir?" he inquired, in a tone of surprise not unmingled with reproach.

I said that I did, and that I wanted £2000 for them; which caused the old man to smile.

"Stones cannot be valued, sir, in a moment," he replied; "still I have no doubt that I could

tell you, on referring back to our books, what was the original price paid for most of these. But, if you will excuse the liberty of my saying so, sir, it seems a pity that you should part with them, when a temporary advance is perhaps all that you require. Young gentlemen often want a few odd hundreds ; and I am sure we should be most happy——”

“ Well,” I said, “ I must have a couple of thousand. Can I borrow that much on the security of my jewels ? ”

The old man looked grave. “ Speaking at a rough guess, sir, I should say that would be the full value of the stones,” he answered. “ I can consult my partner upon the subject ; but I almost doubt——”

“ Don’t doubt, Mr. Jacobson,” I interrupted, “ and don’t trouble yourself to consult your partner. I have no feeling at all about parting with these trinkets ; I have no associations connected with them ; and I shall be only too glad if you will buy them of me for whatever you may think them worth. I know I can trust you to pay me a fair price. I’ll leave them with you now, and, as I’m in rather a hurry for the money, per-

haps you could let me have it by five o'clock this evening. And, by the way, Mr. Jacobson, it would suit me better to be paid in bank-notes than by cheque."

"Very good, sir," replied the old jeweller, who had now evidently made up his mind that I was a second Charles Surface, and that remonstrances would be thrown away upon me. "It is generally thought unwise to carry a large sum in bank-notes about the streets; but I will take care that they shall be ready for you, since you desire it."

I had made this request partly because I did not wish that Lady Constance's name should appear in my banker's book, and partly because I promised myself a certain satisfaction from placing the actual tangible money in her hands. When I called again at five o'clock Mr. Jacobson counted me out £2500 in notes, and regretted his inability to treat with me upon more liberal terms.

"I am perfectly satisfied with the price, thank you," said I. "In fact, it is £500 more than I want."

I then signed a receipt, stuffed my notes into

my pocket, and set off for Hill Street in a mood of joyous anticipation.

It was rather a disappointment to me, on arriving there, to find that Lady Constance was not alone, nor likely to be so for some little time. Surrounded by a circle of visitors, amongst whom were Mr. Sotheran and that jovial member of the Ministry to whom I have already had occasion to allude, she was commenting upon the last news from the seat of war, and did not allow the current of her observations to be disturbed by my entrance.

“If there is one thing that puzzles me more than another,” she was saying, “it is your delight at the success of the Turks. You are as jubilant as if you yourselves had forced the Russians to raise the siege of Silistria; you don’t seem to suspect that all Europe is laughing at your army, which can’t move and has to look on while the Turks do the work. When you do begin fighting, what do you expect to gain? Do you even know what you are fighting for? Is it to ‘protect an oppressed people from the insolence of a tyrant,’ as Mr Sotheran told his constituents the other day?”

“Well, for that among other things,” good-humouredly answered the Minister, to whom these questions were addressed. “We English may be fools; but give us credit at least for possessing a conscience.”

“You represent the sentiments of the nation so admirably,” returned Lady Constance, “that I can’t understand why everybody should say that you will be out of office before you are much older. You care as much about the oppressed people in the East as you care about the oppressed Poles. You would like to take Egypt; only you daren’t do it. You plume yourselves upon your moral cowardice; you shout out that it is a conscience; and all the people cry Amen! Look at Mr. Sotheran, for instance. Mr. Sotheran is a typical Englishman.”

The gentleman referred to, who, with his hands folded upon the top of his walking-stick and his chin resting on his hands, had been studying the pattern of the carpet, assumed a more erect attitude and cleared his voice. Probably it was not disagreeable to him to be described as a typical Englishman.

“Mr. Sotheran,” continued Lady Constance, “is possessed of the most reckless physical intrepidity. I can bear witness to that ; and so can Mr. Maxwell, who will remember a certain afternoon on the Friedensberg. But, morally, I am afraid he is not quite up to the mark. I am afraid he made that speech the other day, not because he believed what he was saying, or supposed that anybody else would believe it, but because he felt bound to drop the customary grains of incense upon the altar of the great British god Humbug.”

Mr. Sotheran reddened a little, but made no reply ; and the Minister rose to take his leave. Lady Constance was evidently not in an amiable temper. By degrees her visitors decamped, looking more or less pained ; only Mr. Sotheran held his ground, and received several broad hints with dogged obtuseness. This disturbed me very little ; for I was quite determined to sit him out, and I felt pretty sure that, if he did not soon take the initiative, he would be dismissed with a flea in his ear. Also I derived a malicious pleasure from observation of his extreme anxiety to get rid of me. He looked at

the clock, he fidgeted about in his chair, he examined his watch ; finally he took to throwing me glances of direct and piteous appeal. Mr. Sotheran had never manifested any jealousy of me—nor, for that matter, of any of Lady Constance's admirers ; he regarded me, I believe, as a complete nonentity, and, if he sometimes found me in the way, did not care to show that he did so. His present uneasiness, therefore, could only be accounted for upon the supposition that he had something particular to say to Lady Constance ; and that this was in fact the case was presently shown, when she, losing patience, remarked :

“ I see you are looking anxiously at the clock, Mr. Sotheran. Pray, don't let me detain you if you have other engagements.”

Thus challenged, Mr. Sotheran rose slowly to his feet, and, with an odd mixture of flurry and dignity, opened fire. “ I was in hopes, Lady Constance, that I might have spoken a word or two to you in private before I went away ; but I have no particular objection to Mr. Maxwell's hearing what I have to say. You were pleased, just now, to speak of me before several gentlemen,

one of whom is a leading member of the political party to which I belong, in a tone which was calculated—perhaps I may add intended—to bring ridicule and discredit upon me. Now I think you will allow that I am not prone to take offence——”

“It is only common justice to you,” interpolated Lady Constance, “to say that you are not.”

“But I must be permitted to observe that, if your opinion of me is what your words imply, it is, to say the least of it, strange that you should continue to receive me, and invite me to your house.”

The remonstrance was not an unreasonable one in itself; but there was a covert insolence about the manner of its delivery which did not escape me, and which Lady Constance, too, evidently understood. She started up from her chair and took two steps towards the speaker, with a look upon her face which, I frankly confess, frightened me. Her cheeks, always pale, were as white as marble now; her lips were tightly set; two vertical lines had appeared between her brows, under which her eyes were

blazing with concentrated anger. The great coarse man whom she faced shrank away from her like a whipped hound. His height must have exceeded hers by nearly a head; but at this moment she seemed positively to tower above him. For about a minute she stood thus, motionless and silent; then, in a low, clear voice, she spoke :

“Say that again, please.”

But Mr. Sotheran's courage was not equal to the task required of it. He made a desperate effort to assert himself; he tried to look her in the face and failed ignominiously; at last he muttered in a sulky tone, “I suppose you understood what I said.”

She disdained to make any rejoinder. With a slight contemptuous movement of her shoulders, she turned away and rang the bell.

“Good-bye, Mr. Sotheran,” she said curtly.

Mr. Sotheran made as though he would have spoken, cleared his voice, stood first on one leg, then on the other, struggled ludicrously to recover his equanimity, found that recovery was not possible, and finally, picking up his hat, left the room without a word.

"I think I frightened my friend that time," remarked Lady Constance, quietly, as the door closed behind him.

"Indeed you did!" said I. "For the matter of that, you frightened me too. I declare I thought you were going to strangle him."

"It was a triumph of spirit over brute force," said Lady Constance, sedately. "No, it wasn't," she exclaimed, with a swift change of tone; "it was a ridiculous, melodramatic, degrading scene, and I wish you had not been here to look on at it. I was obliged to suit my weapons to my antagonist, though: you can't kill a rhinoceros with swan-shot."

"Anyhow, you were successful," I remarked. "He won't come back here in a hurry."

"He will come back in a day or two," answered Lady Constance. "At least, I hope he will," she added, with a bitter laugh; "because, if he doesn't, I shall be driven to send for him."

"Don't say that!" I exclaimed; "I can't bear to hear you talk so. Why do you want the man back? You *don't* want him; it is only because you are in need of money, and because

you are afraid of the future, that you keep him hanging about you—isn't that it?"

"Why, of course that is it," she replied calmly. "You don't suspect me of being enamoured of Mr. Sotheran's boiled-gooseberry eyes, do you?"

"I don't believe you would marry him if you were starving!" I cried. "You deceive yourself—you are always trying to make yourself out capable of baseness that is not in your nature. You talk as though you would sell yourself to that pitiable fellow, and yet, the moment that he presumes ever so slightly upon his advantage, you are ready to tear him limb from limb. You shall never marry him while I can help it! And we have not reached starvation point yet. See—I have done what you told me to do." And I dropped the bundle of notes into her lap.

She started, and stared at me for a moment, with parted lips. Then, to my utter astonishment and dismay, she suddenly burst into tears.

I was down on my knees beside her in an instant. I caught one of her hands and covered it with kisses; I poured forth I don't know what incoherent absurdities; I besought her to tell

me what agitated her so terribly ; I swore that no one should harm her while I was alive to stand between her and misfortune. In short, I talked as arrant nonsense as I suppose that most men would have talked in my place.

She regained her self-control as quickly as she had lost it. She drew away her hand, dried her eyes, and—— “There !” said she ; “you have seen what you won’t see a second time, I think. After all, I am only a woman, and my nerves have been completely upset these last few days. Your kindness has put the finishing touch to it all. You are a dear, good fellow, Charley,” she added in a low voice ; and as I was kneeling beside her, she passed her hand gently once or twice over my hair, murmuring, “a dear, good fellow—only a very foolish one.”

The touch of her fingers seemed to send—for aught I know to the contrary, it *did* send—a succession of electric thrills through me. With my heart beating wildly, I looked up into her face, and saw there an expression of great kindness and gentleness, mingled with just a shade of surprise. “Is it possible,” I gasped, “that you can care for me a little ?”

"I can't make it out," answered she, with a low laugh; "but it seems to me that I do—a little."

Then, in the midst of my exultation, an odd thing happened to me. The old sensation of angry helplessness which had vexed me at Taormina came back with startling vividness. I seemed to see myself swept away by a slow, steady current which I ought to have struck out against, but could not; I had an intense momentary longing to shake myself free of this woman, and to say to her: "If I am to love you, it shall be by my own will, not by yours." All this passed away directly; perhaps it may have been rather an effect of memory than of any present volition. It did not prevent me from protesting my rapture, my gratitude, my unalterable devotion, while Lady Constance, listening silently, continued to stroke my hair.

However, such soft moods were hardly in accordance with her temperament, nor—for some reason which I can't explain—was I altogether sorry when she resumed her ordinary demeanour. She rose, gathering up the bundle of notes, and moved away a few paces. I, too, scrambled up

from my knees, feeling, to tell the truth, just the least bit in the world foolish.

“Do you know, Charley,” said Lady Constance presently, “I never thought you would take me at my word. I was sure that you either couldn’t or wouldn’t find me this money.”

“But you did want it, didn’t you?” I asked anxiously.

“Oh,” she exclaimed, drawing a long breath, “if you only knew how I wanted it! I wanted it so much that yesterday I very nearly fell into the jaws of Mr. Sotheran. He would have gobbled me up this very afternoon, I believe; but you came, like Perseus, and the monster fled. It was I who showed him Medusa’s face, though,” she added, laughing.

“Thank Heaven, you did!” I ejaculated piously. “You won’t let him come back again now, will you?”

She made no immediate reply. “This may tide me over into calm water,” she said presently in a thoughtful tone. “Have you brought me the whole two thousand?”

I nodded. “And five hundred extra, for luck.”

“Poor boy! Well, you have saved me from

something worse than death, perhaps, and I shall not go through the form of thanking you. I don't suppose that Andromeda thanked Perseus. By-the-by, what *did* Andromeda do? Do you recollect?"

"She married the hero, and they lived happily ever afterwards," I replied promptly.

"How dull! There is not much chance of the parallel being carried out in our case, however."

"But you said you cared for me a little," I murmured reproachfully.

"Is that a reason? Don't you think that, if I cared for you a great deal, I should hand you back your money and turn you out of the house? But we won't dwell on that ugly thought. It is enough that you can't possibly afford to marry me now. Whether you will be able to afford it some day, and whether, when you can afford it, you will do it—the answer to both of these questions, depends, I imagine, entirely upon yourself."

I did not say much in reply; but I reflected with comfort, both then and as I walked home afterwards, that my fortunes depended no longer

upon any action or abstention of mine, but upon the circumstance, which must reach my uncle's ears sooner or later, that down at Richmond there dwelt a queer little being named Jimmy Le Marchant.





CHAPTER IV.

I LOSE ALL FAITH IN HUMAN NATURE.

THAT natural discontent with what has been attained, to which it is said that we owe all the greatest deeds that have been done by the greatest men since the world began, may possibly account for the fact that I was very little happier after the scene described in the last chapter than I had been before. I had, it is true, gained something like an avowal of affection from Lady Constance, and something a little less like a pledge; but these things failed to satisfy me. I asked myself disconsolately what the end of it all was to be, and could only reply that I had not the most remote idea. All that seemed certain was a prolongation of uncertainty.

It must be added, too, that Lady Constance's behaviour was not of a kind to encourage sanguine anticipations. Either because she was

afraid that, in a moment of sudden emotion, she had committed herself too deeply, or else out of sheer caprice, she took the first opportunity of convincing me that, whatever privileges I might have acquired as a result of our conference, those of an accepted lover were by no means among them. The next time that we met she was neither more nor less friendly than she had been all along; for some days afterwards she was careful to avoid being left alone with me; and when, by patient manœuvring, I did succeed in procuring a brief private interview, she would talk about nothing but topics of general interest. I on my side, shrank from seeming to claim any reward for services rendered; and besides, the great power which she exercised over me, both made me acquainted with her wishes and prevented me from running counter to them.

And so insensibly we dropped back into the old groove. As the season went on, and my list of acquaintances became enlarged, I went more and more into society, and found no difficulty in obtaining invitations to all the houses where Lady Constance was likely to be encountered—which was a satisfaction, as far as it went. She

herself entertained a good deal, giving constant little dinners to which I enjoyed a standing right of admission, and which were graced by the presence of various distinguished persons. Mr. Sotheran returned to his allegiance, as she had predicted that he would do, having, I presume, purchased pardon by some process of unconditional surrender, and his white waistcoat offended my eyes nearly every time that I presented myself in Hill Street. Knowing, as I did, that he was there as a reserve force, and feeling that in that capacity he might at any moment become formidable, I developed a strong dislike for him, which every now and again found articulate expression; but as he never deigned to notice these attacks, and as it was certain that I should not succeed in dislodging the intruder by rudeness, I ended by accepting him, as I accepted many other inevitable and distasteful things.

Hardly a day passed at this time that I did not run down to the cottage at Richmond, where I was always made welcome, and where my cousin's sympathy and encouragement were a great comfort to me. I had established thoroughly friendly relations with Paulina and Jimmy, the

former of whom decidedly improved upon acquaintance. When she was at her ease, and discoursed in the vulgar tongue natural to her, she was by no means a disagreeable, and at times rather an amusing companion. Her love for her husband, though it often manifested itself in a querulous guise, was evidently deep and sincere, and the outbreaks of temper at which Harry had hinted never took place in my presence. That they did occur at other times was, unfortunately, beyond a doubt; for Jimmy met me one day with a fine black eye, for which he accounted by announcing in a matter-of-course way that mother had pitched a lump of coal at him the night before. "Father said he'd give her the stick, though, if she did it again," added the little man, with unfilial glee.

I am bound to say that Paulina showed signs of great contrition and embarrassment after this untoward incident, and I was glad to see that she was at least ashamed of having been found out; though I looked in vain for any change in her behaviour towards the victim. Truth to tell, there was no love lost between the mother and child; and this was perhaps the least satisfactory

feature in Harry's domestic concerns. Paulina seldom spoke of her son by any other name than "that brat," and Jimmy informed me, with that simplicity of language which distinguished him, that he hated his mother like poison. Upon my rebuking him, he put it to me whether I shouldn't hate any one who pulled my hair, and banged my head against the wall; a query which I evaded ignobly by asking him if he had never heard of the Fifth Commandment. He replied that he had; but that father did not think much of the Ten Commandments, adding triumphantly, "And no more do I. I don't think much of the Bible at all. Father never reads his Bible, and Mother says he'll be sorry for it after he's dead; but I don't believe it, because she reads hers and it don't make her any better. She's a regular bad one—blow me tight if she ain't!"

I endeavoured to point out to him that his logic was faulty, and that he really must not say "blow me tight;" but he answered that the boys down at the river made use of the expression, and proceeded to run over a string of far more objectionable flowers of speech which he had culled from the same prolific soil.

All this, together with Jimmy's remarkable precocity, seemed to render it highly desirable that he should be sent to school as soon as might be ; but Harry paid very little heed to the representations which I took the liberty to make upon this point ; and one can't very well tell a man that neither he nor his wife are suitable company for their own child. I could only hope that better times were in store for all three of them, little as they appeared to contemplate or desire any change of circumstances.

Once I broached the forbidden subject of Harry's possible return home to Paulina ; and was surprised to find her strongly opposed to any such scheme. "He don't want to see his father again," she affirmed. "Anyhow, he says he don't ; and Lord knows I don't want him to ! He's very well as he is, in my opinion. But one thing I'm determined on—if ever he goes to Norfolk, I go with him !"

I said I sincerely hoped she would ; whereupon she turned on me with an angry gleam in her eyes, declaring that she knew very well what I meant when I spoke in that polite voice,

and that she was not going to be talked out of her rights. "Harry can't say but what I've been a good and obedient wife to him; though he does try me so at times that I can hardly keep my hands off his face. I'll do whatever he tells me to do, good or bad, and he may go away and travel for months, without so much as leaving an address, and I sha'n't make no complaint; but to be pensioned off and told to stand o' one side after all these years is what I'll not submit to—that's flat!"

I was unable to convince her that no such sacrifice would be required of her—perhaps, in my heart of hearts, I was not quite convinced of it myself—and, perceiving that she could not be enlisted as an ally, I thought it better to let the subject drop.

But Mrs. Le Marchant was not often so aggressively disposed. Once or twice I hired a boat and took the whole family out on the river, and it was upon these occasions that Paulina appeared to enjoy herself most. Living the secluded life that she did, even those unexciting jaunts were a treat to her; and it was pathetic to see how, at such times, she

would try to attract her husband's notice by an assumption of that sprightliness which may have possessed charms for him in former years, but which, it must be owned, did not sit very gracefully upon a person of her age and figure.

Harry responded to these efforts by blank silence, by faint smiles, occasionally by an ironical word or two that brought flames into Paulina's eyes and cheeks. I wondered sometimes whether he knew what he was doing, or whether he was merely what he appeared to be, good-humouredly indifferent. Certainly, I never heard him speak harshly to his wife, despite the provocation which she often gave him in her anger.

It was about the middle of July when an incident occurred which compelled me to modify in an important particular the estimate that I had formed of my cousin's character. Walking up from the station towards Harry's house one evening, and turning a corner sharply, I ran full tilt against a veiled lady, whose form and gait seemed somehow familiar to me. I apologised, and probably should have passed on without

taking any further notice of her, if she had not started so violently as to invite closer scrutiny. It then became clear to me that I was in the presence of no less a person than Mrs. Farquhar. Great as my surprise was, it was altogether surpassed by her confusion ; and from the agitated and eager manner in which she hastened to inform me that she had been to see her friend Mrs. Macpherson, who had taken a house at Richmond for the summer, I could not but perceive that the old lady was not telling the truth—or, at all events, not the whole truth. It was no part of my duty to set her more at her ease, so I asked her whether she didn't find two thick veils rather stifling in the dog-days. But Mrs. Farquhar was not the woman to be put out of countenance for many minutes. She answered that veils were more necessary in summer than in winter, on account of the dust ; and then turned the tables upon me by saying, " And pray, what may you be doing here ? "

" I also am on my way to visit a friend," I replied.

" Ay, ay," said she ; " you will have plenty of friends here, I dare say. They tell me that

Richmond is a favourite resort of people of—doubtful reputation.”

“Dear me! you don’t allude to Mrs. Macpherson, surely,” I observed.

“I’m talking of *your* friends, not mine,” returned Mrs. Farquhar, severely. “Since we have met, I may just avail myself of this opportunity to tell you that I hear strange accounts of your friends.”

Considering that Mrs. Farquhar and I had parted, a twelvemonth before, upon the most affectionate terms, this looked very like an open declaration of hostilities, and I had no doubt in my own mind that she had decided upon once more rejecting me in favour of Harry, and had just visited him in order to make known her intentions. It so happened that I asked for nothing better than such a change of front; while, as for any feelings of animosity that Mrs. Farquhar might harbour against me, I was more curious to learn the cause of them than troubled by the fact of their existence.

“Will you explain yourself?” I asked blandly.

“To be sure I will,” she answered, without a moment’s hesitation. “That Lady Constance

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Milner whom you picked up, or rather who picked you up, abroad, is not what I would call a safe friend for a young man."

"But perhaps you don't know very much about her," I took leave to suggest.

"I know more than you think," retorted Mrs. Farquhar, nodding a flowery bonnet at me impressively. "I'm an old woman, and I don't see much of society; but I have acquaintances who are better informed than myself, and when I make inquiries about your Lady Constance, what do I find? Why, that she is just one of those ladies whom decent people don't care to visit."

"Really, Mrs. Farquhar," I said, "your informants appear to be rather rash in their statements. Lady Constance Milner is the sister of Lord Rossan, who was my chief at Franzenshöhe; she is pretty well known in what is called good society, and this is the first time that I have heard a word breathed against her character."

"Am I speaking of her character?" returned Mrs. Farquhar, not in the least abashed. "She may have a character or she may have none; I'm willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. What I said was that decent people don't care to

visit her, and to that I stick. Moreover, I know that she has run through all her money and won't scruple to run through yours, if ever she gets the chance. Now I think I have explained myself, and as I have to find a fly and drive down to the railway, I'll wish you good evening."

I certainly could not complain of any want of explicitness on Mrs. Farquhar's part, and I thought I would not pursue the topic. In common civility I could do no less than offer to fetch a fly for her, and she said I might do that, if I liked.

"I wonder Mrs. Macpherson did not think of sending you down in her carriage," I remarked, just by way of letting her see that I knew very well where she had been last.

"Mrs. Macpherson does not keep a carriage," Mrs. Farquhar replied, an obstinate look coming over her face, which I took to mean that wild horses should not drag any compromising revelations from her. "I'll just sit down on yonder bench and wait for you," she added, suiting the action to the word; and when I had performed my errand she bade me good-bye, saying that she would tell my uncle that she had seen me.

“Do, Mrs. Farquhar,” I answered; “and tell him at the same time that my friends at Richmond are not bad people, though I must confess that they are not in society. Lady Constance Milner, as perhaps you know, lives in London, and, notwithstanding the testimony of your informants, I must continue to believe that decent folks visit her.”

“Keep your opinion, and I’ll keep mine,” rejoined Mrs. Farquhar. “We shall see who is right, if we live long enough.” With which she told the coachman to drive on, and was presently lost to sight.

I proceeded thoughtfully on my way towards Clarence Cottage, feeling that a crisis was at hand, and by no means sorry for it. Nothing but an unequivocal crisis could disentangle the threads of my present and future life; it would be a clear gain, too, to be freed from the various engagements of secrecy which I had permitted to be imposed upon me, and which I had found very irksome of late in more ways than one.

“So you have had a visit from Mrs. Farquhar,” I said to Harry, whom I found leaning over his garden gate.

"*I* have a visit from Mrs. Farquhar!" he ejaculated, removing his cigar from his lips, and staring at me in blank amazement. "From my revered grandmother, do you mean? What on earth are you talking about?"

I was so positive as to the fact that it had never occurred to me to suppose that Harry would deny it, and I was a good deal offended by the apparent want of confidence shown in his reply. "I have just seen and spoken to her," I said, in an aggrieved tone.

"Well?"

"Well; I took it for granted that she had been here."

"But she didn't tell you so, I presume?" observed Harry, smiling.

"She didn't tell me so, certainly; but I felt no doubt whatever upon the subject; and to tell you the honest truth, I feel none now."

"You are not complimentary," Harry remarked.

"You haven't said yet that she has not been here," I answered bluntly. "If you do, of course I shall believe you."

Harry laughed outright. "You seem to think

I have a very pretty talent for prevarication," said he. "I assure you the old lady hasn't been to see me. In years gone by she used to arrange meetings with me from time to time, and she was always good for a tenner, which was very convenient. But since your star has been in the ascendant she has dropped me like a hot coal. I gave up writing to her as a bad job ever so long ago."

After that, I could only congratulate myself upon my prudence in not having mentioned Harry's name to Mrs. Farquhar, as indeed I had been upon the point of doing. I told him of this, and he whistled, remarking that it might have been rather awkward if I had let the cat out of the bag. "Not that the old lady would have been likely to pay me a call; still she might have taken it into her head to do so, and I don't care to let her know that I am married, you see."

"My dear fellow, that's the very thing you ought to let her know!" I cried. "It's the very thing that would make all the difference to you, if you would only consent to let my uncle hear of it."

But Harry answered, with some impatience, that we had already discussed that question, and were not likely to agree about it; and after we had speculated a little upon the cause of Mrs. Farquhar's obvious embarrassment on being recognised by me, we began to talk about other matters.

"Whom do you suppose Charley saw this afternoon, Paulina?" said Harry, when we went into the house. "Why, my old grandmother. He made up his mind at once that she had been to pay us a visit, and I had some trouble in persuading him to believe that we hadn't been honoured so far."

"I don't know about honour," grumbled Paulina, sullenly. "She hasn't been here, that's certain; and for the matter of that, I don't want her here—nor yet any of them."

Now, after all this, my stupefaction at what followed will, I think, be considered excusable.

I had taken my leave, and was walking down the hill, when a pattering of small feet behind me caused me to look round, and Jimmy, breathless and excited, dashed up to me. "Oh, Cousin Charley," he gasped, "have you heard

the news? Such a funny old woman has been to see us, and she says she's my great-grand-mother. She talked to father ever so long, and she cried—oh, my! how she did cry! And she gave me this," concluded Jimmy, triumphantly, holding up a bright sovereign.

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed, "this really does beat everything! Jimmy," I went on feebly, "there must be some mistake. Are you sure—quite sure—that the old woman saw your father?"

Jimmy nodded repeatedly. "I should just think she did!" said he. "You ought to have seen her cry! Isn't it very silly for grown-up people to cry? And father kissed her, and so did mother, and so did I, when she gave me the quid, and——" But here he suddenly broke off, and put his forefinger in his mouth with a look of apprehension. "P'raps it's a secret, though," he said. "Do you think it's a secret, Cousin Charley?"

"Eh?—what?—a secret? Oh, yes, I should think it is. Sure to be!" answered I, endeavouring to collect my scattered wits.

"My wig! I say, you won't let on about

my telling you?" said Jimmy, evidently much alarmed.

"No, I won't let on," I answered. "I don't suppose you'll say anything about it at home either."

"No fear!" returned the urchin, shaking his head. Then he said he must go, and withdrew in a sober and chastened mood.

I don't know whether he would have been shocked at hearing that his father had told me a monstrous falsehood; probably not. But in any case it seemed best to keep that knowledge from him. As for me, I felt that my faith, not in Harry only, but in humanity at large, had received a crushing blow. "If he had at least had the grace to look a little ashamed of himself," I thought indignantly, "it would have been something; but to lie in that unblushing way—it was enough to bring the roof down upon him! And Paulina too!—she was just as bad. Oh, Ananias and Sapphira couldn't hold a candle to them! Well; one lives and learns; I shall never believe in man, woman, or child again.

However, I did Jimmy the justice to remem-

ber that he, at least, had been no party to the fraud. I was so disgusted with his ungrateful and untruthful parents that if it had not been for him I would have washed my hands of them then and there, being now quite convinced that they were not worthy of the sacrifice which I had contemplated making for their sake.





CHAPTER V.

I AM TAKEN TO THE OPERA.

"BLESSED," runs the modern adage, "are they that expect little, for they shall not be disappointed;" and, doubtless, we are all too prone to form an exaggerated estimate of what is due to ourselves and to society at large from the mass of our fellow-creatures. Great injuries, which commonly arise out of great temptations, for which the philosophic mind can make allowance, are comparatively easy to pardon; it is the minor and meaner offences—such as, perhaps, our own guardian-angel may have been called upon at one time or another to make a note of—it is the shabby little scandals, the ingrati- tudes, the infidelities of everyday life, that cause us to cry aloud in our anguish that man- kind is corrupt, and altogether become abomin- able. For my own part, by dint of growing old

and making use of such small powers of observation as I possess, I have, I believe, schooled myself into something not unlike the beatific state of mind above mentioned ; but thirty years ago I was, as a matter of course, much more exacting. Human nature did not, at that period of my life, strike me as being at all a complex affair, and I had little difficulty in dividing mankind roughly into two categories : namely, good fellows and scoundrels. Liars, I need hardly say, were *ex officio* members of the latter class ; and, after what had occurred at Richmond, I really could not see my way to exempt Harry from the penalties attaching to the denomination under which his conduct necessarily brought him. I remembered now, with bitterness, what my uncle had told me long before about his son's habitual mendacity, and, without stopping to ask why the culprit's past sins had seemed to me so much less heinous than his present one, I anathematised myself for having been such a fool as to think the same fountain could give forth sweet water and bitter.

One thing was certain, I could not attempt to associate with Harry upon the old terms or

to feign ignorance of his duplicity. I felt fully entitled, and very much inclined, to write him a short note saying that I had found him out; that I should abstain from saying a word that might prejudice him in my uncle's eyes; but that, since he preferred intrigues to plain dealing, he must expect no more aid from me. For Jimmy's sake, however, I would not do that; only I took care to be out all day in order to avoid a passing visit from my cousin, and I determined to go down to Richmond no more.

It would have been a relief to me to tell Lady Constance of the distressing discovery that I had made. Not that I should have been likely to get much pity from her, for she would certainly have both thought and said that I was rightly served; but all my life long I have experienced a necessity for relating my various troubles, immediately after their occurrence, to somebody; and, like most people who own to that kind of weakness, I have seldom lacked patient listeners. It was, however, out of the question that I should take Lady Constance into my confidence in this matter; for Harry had repeatedly and pointedly mentioned her as one

of the persons whom he especially desired to keep in the dark as to his identity, and his having been false to me did not, of course, release me from the promises that I had made to him.

For the rest, Lady Constance was far indeed from entertaining any suspicions of the insignificant Chapman, and my lugubrious looks, which she very soon noticed, were attributed by her to dissatisfaction with her treatment of me—a form of ingratitude that never failed to provoke her to anger.

“What is it that you want?” she asked impatiently, one evening when I had been dining with her, and, according to my custom had outstayed her other guests. “You sit there with a face as long as one of Mr. Sotheran’s harangues; you won’t talk to people and do your duty to society; you make yourself supremely ridiculous, if you only knew it. Do you imagine that you are the only person in the world with whom life goes askew? I myself have anxieties enough and to spare; yet I manage to show a tolerably unconcerned face to my friends.”

“You can’t do a great many things that I can’t,” I observed.

“Very possibly; I shall not contradict you there. But patience and self-control are virtues within the reach of the humblest capacity, and if you possess neither, it is because you don’t choose to be at the pains of acquiring them. How foolish you are not to enjoy the present and make the most of it! The present does not satisfy you? Wait, then.”

“How long?” I asked. “Until I lose what I am waiting for?”

Lady Constance struck the palm of her hand sharply with her fan. “You are assuming the pettishness of a spoilt boy,” she exclaimed; “and I detest spoilt boys. You were much pleasanter at Franzenshöhe.”

Now it so chanced that that was exactly what I was thinking of her at the moment; though I didn’t like to say so.

“Come!” she said presently in a more amiable tone; “what shall I do to put you in a good humour? Will you come to the Opera with me?”

“Isn’t it rather late?” I objected, looking at my watch; for I infinitely preferred staying where I was.

“ Oh, no ; we shall hear the last two acts of the *Puritani*, and that is enough in all conscience. Anyhow, I mean to go ; you can do as you like about accompanying me.”

To be taken to the play against one's will is a small hardship enough, and is submitted to uncomplainingly by a great many people every night of the year ; yet, at this particular moment, I chafed against the tacit command which obliged me to answer mechanically that I should be delighted. Was I to be Lady Constance's bond-slave for the rest of my natural life ? Would it always be sufficient for her to raise her little finger in order to turn me round it ? And in the very improbable event of my ever becoming her husband, would such unconditional submission on my part be calculated to win her respect ? I asked myself these questions while she went away to make some change in her dress, and afterwards, while we drove rapidly through the streets towards Covent Garden. I was not angry with her ; for it is evident that, if a man chooses to prostrate himself at a woman's feet, she will hardly be able to avoid treading upon him—I was not angry with her ; but I was angry with myself for

having assumed so unbecoming an attitude, and still more so for being unable to abandon it.

It so chanced that we reached the Opera during an *entr'acte*, and our entrance into the large and somewhat conspicuously placed box which some one had lent to Lady Constance for the evening, consequently aroused an amount of notice which it might not have done a little earlier or later. Independent as Lady Constance was in her habits, and little as she cared about ruffling the prejudices of the British matron, she seldom chose to place herself in a really compromising position ; and to appear at the Opera, attended by one young man only, was undoubtedly a compromising act, so far as it went. I had not thought of this before ; but I realised it fully when I saw that eyes and opera-glasses were being brought to bear upon us from all quarters of the house, and I wondered whether she realised it also. I saw people staring at us and whispering together ; I could guess pretty well what they were saying ; I knew that, for the moment, my name was upon the lips of a large proportion of the audience ; but, truth to tell, all this neither discontented nor displeased me. From what I can remember

of my own feelings, and from what I have observed of others, I am inclined to believe that young men generally glory in situations which at a more advanced period of life we learn to regard with holy horror. I had no objection to being spoken of as one whom Lady Constance Milner delighted to honour; it did not strike me that any of those who thus spoke of me would be likely to be laughing in their sleeves; I was conscious indeed of an amiable wish that Mr. Sotheran might be somewhere among the spectators.

But before the curtain rose again my silly vanity was snuffed out in an unexpected fashion. While I was surveying the house languidly and scrutinising the various boxes and their occupants, a face came on a sudden within the field of my vision which caused me to lower my glasses and to turn hot and cold all over. Since I was so willing to advertise myself as Lady Constance's favoured suitor, it would have been difficult to say why I should have minded Miss Dennison's recognition of me in that character; but I did mind it. I minded it so much that, if escape had seemed in any way practicable, I should most certainly have arisen and fled without

more ado. As it was, I sat motionless, unable to remove my eyes from her, and aware that she, for her part, was gazing steadily and somewhat eagerly in my direction. My sight, as a young man, was remarkably good, and I could distinguish every detail of Maud's features across the intervening space as clearly as if she had been within a few feet of me. I saw that she was looking, not at my companion, but at me; her lips were slightly parted; her large gray eyes were opened rather widely; I almost fancied that she wished to attract my attention. At last I felt bound to bow, and received a nod in return. Then I glanced at Lady Constance, and perceived that none of this by-play had been lost upon her.

"You look quite overcome," she remarked, with something not very far removed from a sneer in her smile. "May I ask whether the young woman over the way is our old friend Dulcinea Dennison?"

The nickname of Dulcinea was inappropriate and offensive; but I thought perhaps I had better not take exception to it. "It is Miss Dennison," I replied, a trifle sullenly.

Lady Constance raised her opera-glass, adjusted them deliberately, and made a lengthy and careful inspection of Maud; after which she delivered her verdict, without any sort of regard for my feelings. "She is pretty—extremely pretty, in her way. If you still possess any influence with her, though, you should use it to dissuade her from sitting with her mouth open; a habit of that kind would be enough to make Venus herself look like a booby. But I believe all the Norfolk rustics have mouths from ear to ear, have they not?"

Now, as I have already hinted, I had been vaguely desirous of picking a quarrel with Lady Constance all the evening; but this really outrageous speech would have roused my ire at any time. "She is *not* a Norfolk rustic," I retorted hotly; "her mouth is simply perfect in shape, as anybody can see; and as for her sitting with it open—well, I must say that you yourself yawn more often than any one that I ever saw or heard of."

My rudeness did not provoke Lady Constance, who only laughed slightly. "But I am always careful to conceal my yawns behind my hand,"

she observed. "Besides, I am not pretty, so it doesn't signify. You have not quite got over your first love after all, I see."

"You know very well that that is not true," I was beginning; but she laid her finger on my arm and stopped me.

"We won't wrangle over it in public, please," she said, still laughing. "Do you know that you are as red as a turkey-cock and that everybody is staring at you? Very likely Miss Dennison only opened her perfect mouth in horror at the sight of you in your present predicament; which would show what a well brought up young woman she must be. She is quite right; I am neither old nor ugly enough to dispense with the safety of numbers, and in my heart I am dreadfully frightened of Mrs. Grundy into the bargain. Let us hasten to put a stop to the scandal. Quite down there, in the left-hand corner, near the entrance to the stalls, you will see a large white patch standing out of the shade; it is the waistcoat of Mr. Sotheran. Go down and fetch him. We will not have him alone, though, on account of Miss Dennison's mouth and Mrs. Grundy's tongue. In other

parts of the house you will discover other acquaintances. Tell them all to come up here and talk to me. As for you, you had better go and talk to Miss Dennison."

"Thank you; I think I will," answered I, defiantly; though I had no intention of doing anything of the kind.

I carried out my instructions; I collected the gratified Sotheran and two other men, and then, retiring to the back of the box, gave myself up to disconsolate meditation. I was by way of being offended with Lady Constance, both on account of the ill-natured manner in which she had spoken of Maud and of the readiness she had shown to dispense with my society; but soon I abandoned this pretended grievance, and acknowledged inwardly that it was not with Lady Constance, her sayings or her doings, that I was dissatisfied, but with my own life, and with what I had made of it. The four people in front of me were keeping up a brisk interchange of chatter and chaff; even after the curtain rose three of them continued to talk in an undertone, only Mr. Sotheran, who occupied the place which I had vacated, relapsing into

serene, radiant silence. None of them took any notice of me, nor did I pay much attention to their proceedings. While they were whispering together, while solo, chorus, and recitative were succeeding one another on the stage, while bouquets were being thrown and hands clapped I was wandering in spirit far away from all that noise, heat, and glitter. I was sitting in a punt among the tall weeds of Thirlby Broad; I was standing in the conservatory at the old Rectory, the cold moon shining upon the glass, upon the colourless flowers, and upon a shadowy white figure bent over them; in a melancholy procession the lost days of my youth were passing before me, and every now and again I was muttering inaudibly, "Oh, you ass! you unspeakable ass!"

Thus it came to pass that at the end of the act I yielded to an impulse which had been growing upon me for half an hour or more, and, slipping quietly out into the corridor, passed round to the door of the box which was occupied by Maud and her friends. I was at once admitted, and was presently shaking hands with Mrs. Saville, that sister of the Rector's under whose roof Maud's childhood had been

spent, and with whom I had a slight acquaintance. I was introduced to her daughter, and the two ladies received me with that modified civility which is all that a young man without definite intentions or definite prospects is entitled to expect; but from Maud herself I met with a much warmer greeting.

"Oh, Charley," she exclaimed, "I am so glad you have come! I was afraid you didn't intend to speak to me, and I was thinking of making a signal to you, only Aunt Charlotte said it wouldn't be proper." Then she bent forward and added in a lower tone, "I want rather particularly to talk to you about something."

The opportune entrance at this moment of an eligible young gentleman, upon whom Mrs. Saville bestowed a motherly smile of welcome, enabled me to reply that I was all attention. Maud ceded her place to the new-comer, who dropped into it without much protestation, and, withdrawing into the background, beckoned to me to follow her. I asked her whether she was going to stay any time in London, and she answered that she would probably remain a few weeks with her aunt. "But my real reason for

coming up now," she added, "was that I hoped to see you. Charley, you must go home at once—at once, mind. Things are going badly there."

I was startled for an instant; but her meaning flashed across me directly. "I know what it is," I said. "Mrs. Farquhar has found Harry and means to bring him back to Thirlby."

"Yes, that is it; but there is worse than that. I am afraid your uncle is giving way. My father says he is sure of it, and that he hasn't seen Mr. Le Marchant in such low spirits for years. You seem amused; but I can assure you there is nothing to laugh at. I believe your only chance is to go down and see him immediately, and I came to London to tell you so. You will go, won't you, Charley?" she concluded persuasively. "You won't be so silly as to ruin yourself, when a word or two might set everything straight!"

"It's awfully kind of you to interest yourself about me," said I, "but——"

"What nonsense!" she interrupted. "Of course I interest myself about you, and I hate to be called 'kind' by my friends."

"Very well," I answered, laughing; "then I'll endeavour not to call you 'kind' any more."

But don't you see that even if, as you say, I could set things straight by a word or two, I should be bound to hold my tongue! The real truth is that no words will ever move my uncle in one direction or the other; but anyhow, I have always thought, and still think, that Harry has been unjustly treated, and that he ought to have his own again."

"Perhaps so; but let us at least have fair play. If Mr. Le Marchant, after all these years, suddenly discovers that he has done his son an injustice and determines to have him back again, well and good. But what I do object to is that he should be put in your place because he is supposed to be a steadier fellow than you are."

"I don't know that any one supposes that," said I.

"Of course not;—you don't know anything about it. But *I* know. Mrs. Farquhar has done you a great deal more harm than you think. She goes about everywhere saying that you are extravagant and idle, and—and—well, all sorts of disagreeable things that are not true."

"But perhaps they are true."

"I don't believe it," answered Maud stoutly.

"Mrs. Farquhar makes a great deal of a small farm being put up for sale ; but Mr. Le Marchant himself told my father that you had not asked him for a penny ; and as for the rest—well, perhaps that is not true either. But even if it were——"

She paused here, and I inquired what further iniquities had been laid to my charge.

"Will you be offended if I tell you?" she asked. "It isn't worth while to repeat little shrewish speeches and hints ; the sum and substance of it all is that Mrs. Farquhar suspects you of wanting to marry somebody who will eat up the property."

This was a subject upon which I was not disposed to enter. "I can't make out about my uncle's wanting to part with land," I said ; "it is very unlike him to do that. Do you know which farm it is that he means to dispose of?"

"Deepham, I believe. It is poor land, you know ; but the Welbys have always had a hankering after it because it juts into their property, and my father says Sir Digby will give more for it than it is worth. At all events, Mrs. Farquhar was not telling the truth in saying that

Mr. Le Marchant needed the money to pay your debts."

"No ; she certainly was not," I agreed ; "but if it amuses her to tell lies, she's welcome ; it doesn't hurt me. By George !" I exclaimed, in a sudden access of disgust with the entire human race, "I believe everybody tells lies, except you and I and Uncle Bernard."

"Won't you even make an exception in favour of Lady Constance Milner ?" asked Maud, with a slightly malicious smile. "Is that Lady Constance in the box opposite ?"

I answered gloomily that it was.

"She is distinguished - looking," observed Maud, "and she seems to have plenty to say for herself. Tell me, Charley, is it really true that you want to marry her ?"

"Down at Hailsham you laughed at the idea of my doing such a thing," I remarked.

"Did I ? Well, I am not laughing now ; and I want very much to know whether you are in earnest about her."

"Oh, I suppose so," I answered in a sort of despair. "I don't know. Sometimes I think I am, and sometimes I think I am not. However,

she won't marry me now that Harry is to have Thirlby ; so it doesn't matter."

Maud frowned thoughtfully. "She cannot very well marry you if she is badly off and if you have only a few hundreds a year. But if you are in earnest—and I think you must be—you ought, for her sake, to stand up for yourself."

"Dear me !" I exclaimed irritably, "you are very anxious to see me married to her. Luckily, I am not in a position to yield to temptation. If my uncle has decided to forgive Harry, it is not because of anything that Mrs. Farquhar has said against me ; I am as certain of that as I am of my own existence. I don't think that there can be any harm in my telling you now that I met Harry a long time ago, and that I have been doing my best ever since to smooth the way for his return."

Maud looked completely puzzled, and confessed that she was so. "I am convinced that Mr. Le Marchant is displeased with you," she said at last, "and my father thinks the same thing. Tell me about this young man. What do you think of him ?"

"He isn't a young man any longer," I answered. "Honestly speaking, I don't think much of him. At first I liked him; but he told me a very shabby sort of lie the other day, and I can't get over it. I shall let him play his own hand now. Of course I shall not stand in his way; but I don't mean to help him again. To be sure, I couldn't help him much if I would."

Maud was about to make some rejoinder; but the rising of the curtain and the departure of the eligible youth put a stop to confidential intercourse, and she only managed to say, as I was bidding her good-night, "You will go to Thirlby, won't you?"

"I won't promise," answered I. "As far as I can see at present, my going there would do no earthly good."

Then I returned to Lady Constance's box in a less sentimental, but not much more cheerful frame of mind than that in which I had quitted it. At the conclusion of the performance Mr. Sotheran was kind enough to congratulate me in a loud, sonorous voice, upon my good fortune in having been accorded so lengthy an interview by the beautiful girl opposite.

"We all saw you," said he. "A very charming young lady, upon my word. May I venture to ask her name?"

Lady Constance answered for me. "That young lady," she said, laughing, "is a Miss Dennison, an old flame of Mr. Maxwell's. They broke a sixpence together in their childhood, and when he left his happy home she gave him a 'bacca-box marked with his name, or some other token of her regard. And she has never been false she declares—whatever he may have been during his wanderings. Don't look so angry, Mr. Maxwell; they are all envying you—especially Mr. Sotheran, who is innocent of having broken any sixpences or hearts in his life."

So we made our way down the staircase; but when I was handing Lady Constance into her brougham, she turned upon me all of a sudden with a cold look of contempt. "After all," said she, "you are not worth much."

She was gone before I had time to ask her what she meant; and I walked away westwards, wondering whether it was possible that she could be jealous of Maud.



CHAPTER VI.

I RECEIVE ADVICE FROM HARRY AND MR. SOTHERAN.

It falls to the lot of most men, at one time or another of their lives, to be compelled to look through the papers of a deceased friend or relative; and some people, if one may judge by their subsequent oracular utterances and shakings of the head, do not find this task a wholly distasteful one. It is apt, no doubt, to lead to highly interesting discoveries, to throw broad and unexpected lights upon the character of the defunct, and to add something to the searcher's stock of knowledge and wisdom. Nevertheless, the act of prying into the private letters of a dead man might seem, if it did not come under the head of a duty, to be not very far removed from the quintessence of meanness; and therefore, let us hope, there will always be a certain

number of honest folks in the world who, after performing it, will go about for some days with shamed faces and depressed spirits. Perhaps, upon the whole, it is more charitable to prevent the risk of honest persons being put to shame by destroying all letters of a strictly private nature while one is still in a position to destroy them ; and, for my own part, I have always endeavoured to act upon this principle. When I die, my heirs, executors, and assigns will not find themselves overburdened with manuscript. In the despatch-box which stands upon my writing-table they will discover my will, a few other documents of importance, and only a single packet of letters, every one of which they are heartily welcome to peruse, and will indeed be all the better for perusing.

These letters are written in a clear, cramped writing—the writing of a student, accustomed to making marginal notes. The hand that traced the crabbed characters has turned to dust ; the paper is yellow with age ; the ink has faded to a pale brown hue ; the subject-matter relates to events which, for the most part, have long since passed into the category of forgotten things.

Yet it still happens to me, every now and again, to read them over, and one of them (dated Thirlby, 10th July 1854) lies before me now. In it I am informed that my uncle, having been told of Harry's marriage and Jimmy's birth, and having seen attested copies of the marriage and baptismal certificates, has felt bound to invite the whole family to pay him a visit. "After all that I have said to you at different times," the writer proceeds, "you will easily understand that I have not as yet committed myself in any way as to the ultimate disposal of my property; nor shall I do so in haste. At the same time I want you to clearly understand that your chance of succeeding me here has been changed by events from a very good to a very indifferent one. I don't care to disguise from you that I consider what has happened as a misfortune both for you and for me; but I hope our backs are broad enough to bear most burdens. If not we must try to broaden them."

And then, after many kind words and some sensible advice, he goes on: "One thing you ought certainly to know, namely, the amount of income that you may henceforth expect; and as

to that, I may say that, during my life, you will always have a thousand a-year (including the interest of your own money). After I die there will be a little more ; but not very much, I am afraid, for I think I am bound to hand over the estate to my successor as I received it."

My uncle was evidently very sorry for me ; but for myself I had no regrets. For some weeks past I had felt convinced that Harry's restoration was only a question of time, and it was a relief to have done with suspense and mystery. Of my own prospects I preferred, for the moment, not to think. I pushed the consideration of them into a pigeon-hole of my mind, only remarking to myself that they were no worse than I had expected them to be. At that time I hardly knew whether a thousand a year was a large or a small income for a bachelor ; though I could not but be aware that it would be ridiculously inadequate to the requirements of Lady Constance Milner's husband.

My cousin had behaved so badly to me that I felt under no obligation to congratulate him upon the change in his fortunes ; nevertheless, on the day succeeding that of my meeting with

Maud at the Opera, I could not resist taking the train for Richmond. In this I was actuated, I own, chiefly by curiosity. I wanted to see what Harry would do when confronted with a direct accusation of double-dealing ; added to which, I was anxious to hear any account that Paulina might have to give of her share in the discreditable business.

Jimmy, who was swinging on the garden-gate, descried me from afar, and came tearing down towards me with extravagant demonstrations of joy. "Oh, Cousin Charley!" he exclaimed, "*have* you heard? We're all going down to-morrow to that place where you live, and we're to stay a long time. Perhaps we shall stay there always, if we're good, father says ; but mother says she don't believe a word of it. Why don't you come with us?"

I answered that I hoped to join the party later.

"I say," Jimmy went on, turning his sharp little face up to me, "do you think the old buffer will let us stop?"

"I hope so," I replied ; "but I wouldn't call him 'the old buffer,' if I were you. He is your grandfather, you know."

"So he is," said Jimmy, with a delighted chuckle; "what a rum start! I should think he's sure to like father and me; but if mother chucks a glass of water in his face, or something, he may cut up rough, don't you see?"

"I dare say she won't do that," I remarked.

Jimmy shook his head doubtfully. "I wouldn't answer for her," said he; "she's been precious queer all day—laughing and crying, you know, the way she always does before she pitches into one of us. I tell you what; I wish she'd stop here and let father and me go without her!"

I thought to myself that Jimmy was, perhaps, not the only person who entertained that amiable wish; but I made no reply. As we approached the cottage, Harry came slowly down the path to meet us. He looked a little nervous and seemed anxious to avoid my eye; but it was in his ordinary calm voice that he said:

"I'm glad you thought of coming down this afternoon. We are off to-morrow, as I suppose you have heard. Now, Jimmy, make yourself scarce; your cousin and I are going to have some private conversation." When the boy was

gone, he added, "I am afraid you are not best pleased."

"I am not pleased at having been humbugged," answered I, bluntly; for I didn't see why I should mince matters. "I think it is quite right that you should go to Thirlby; you know that well enough."

Harry sighed. "The experiment is not likely to prove a success," he said; "but I am bound to make it, I suppose. You are annoyed, I fancy, because I didn't tell you that my grandmother had been here the other day; but really I couldn't help that."

"Why, you told me in so many words that she had *not* been here!" I exclaimed indignantly.

"That comes to pretty much the same thing, doesn't it? What could I do when you put the question to me? The old lady had made me promise that I wouldn't let anybody know we had seen her."

"I don't think you ought to have said what you did, all the same," returned I. "It isn't as if you had contented yourself with simply denying the fact; you spoke in such a way that it was impossible to disbelieve you."

"But is there any particular merit in telling a clumsy lie?" asked Harry, mildly. "If you say that all lies are wicked, I understand you; but as the only conceivable object of lying is to deceive, it seems to me that one may as well do the thing artistically while one is about it."

"Well," I said, "I give you every credit for being a first-class artist. I shouldn't much care to excel in that particular branch of art myself; but there's no accounting for tastes. The drawback to being so very clever is that when a man finds that you have taken him in once, he is apt to suspect you of having taken him in before."

Harry stole a quick side-long glance at me, but said nothing.

"You tell me," I continued, "that Mrs. Farquhar did not wish you to mention her having been in your house; and that is all very well. But what made her come to your house? I have an idea—and if I am wrong, you have only yourself to blame for it—that you have been privately scheming to make your way back to Thirlby all the time that you have been protesting to me that you did not want ever to see the place again. I tell you this because I may not have another

opportunity, and because I should like you to understand that I am not an absolute fool, though I may be credulous."

Harry's apparent shamelessness had goaded me into saying rather more than I had intended; but I became furious when he rejoined quietly:

"Are you not feeling a little sore at the prospect of losing a fine estate? After all, it would be strange if you were not."

"Think that I am, then, if you like," cried I, in great wrath. "Think so, if you can, after all that I have said and done to prove myself your friend. I suppose you can't understand how a gentleman feels about such things."

"By all means," said Harry, "let it be agreed that I am incapable of entering into a gentleman's feelings. Nevertheless, I didn't ask Mrs. Farquhar to come here, and I didn't want her to come. I thought, and think, that the sight of Paulina would be quite enough to complete the sentiment of disgust with which my father has honoured me for so many years; and therefore, if I had been scheming against you, the very last thing that I should have wished to make known would have been my marriage. The old lady

had my address, and she chose to make a descent upon Richmond without giving me a hint of her intentions. If you don't believe me, ask her."

I did not know what to think. I had lost faith in Harry ; yet it was difficult to doubt that he was speaking the truth in this particular instance. "Perhaps I ought to apologise," I began at last, rather reluctantly.

"Pray don't think of doing that," he interrupted, with a short laugh ; "nobody is bound to apologise to *me* under any circumstances. The only wonder is that you should have trusted me as long as you have done. But I tell you candidly that your present indignation seems to me positively ridiculous. Why should I have wished to conceal from you that my grandmother had been here ? She asked me to keep it dark, and I made no difficulty about obliging her. As far as I understand you, you would have done the same thing ; only you would have quieted your conscience by doing it so badly that you would have been detected at once."

I was puzzled, and ingenuously confessed as much ; whereat Harry laughed again.

"I know you are," he said ; "you think there

is some dark plot on foot. Let me tell you the truth ; you can believe me or not, as you please. Mrs. Farquhar has thrown you overboard, not out of any love for me, but because she has taken a scare about you. She is a parsimonious old creature, and some one has told her that you are developing into a spendthrift. Besides which she heard that it was quite upon the cards that you might marry an extravagant woman. Immediately it occurred to her that even I, bad as I am, might be less likely to ruin the estate than Lady Constance Milner, and she dashed up here post-haste to tell me so. She was so much in earnest that she accepted Paulina without making many wry faces, and wept over Jimmy. All this would probably have led to nothing ; but when my father heard that I had a son, he found out that it was his duty to try and make friends with me, and he has sent for me accordingly. What that will lead to remains to be seen. If you ask me, I expect that it will lead to the whole lot of us being kicked out of the house at the end of a week."

By this time I was a little ashamed of myself. I held out my hand to Harry, who said,

“Do you acquit me of plotting and scheming, then?”

“Yes,” I answered; “I do. The fact of the matter is, Harry, that you and I have a different way of looking at things; and I confess that I was a little staggered by your—your——”

“By my readiness of resource, let us say. Now I do wonder whether I shall put you in a rage if I repeat the question that I started with! Anyhow, I’ll risk it. Are you feeling at all sore about my going to Thirlby?”

“You don’t put me in a rage by asking such questions,” I replied; “but you astonish me rather. Haven’t I been doing all I could to bring about this very thing ever since I first met you?”

“Yes; but success is not always as pleasing as endeavour. You ought to be feeling sore, you know; it must be an infernal nuisance for you. What about your matrimonial prospects, for instance?”

I shrugged my shoulders in silence.

“Now listen to me, Charley,” said Harry, laying his hand upon my arm; “don’t you hurry off to Lady Constance and tell her the game is

up. The game is not up at all. My father detests me ; unless he is very much altered from what he used to be, he will be simply horrified at Paulina ; and I doubt whether he is of an age to enjoy the playful ways of small boys. I couldn't, in justice to Jimmy, refuse to accept the olive-branch ; but I look upon this visit as a very doubtful experiment, and I think there is an excellent chance of my being finally cleared out of your path before the autumn."

"You don't understand your father," said I. "He will do what he believes to be his duty, whatever happens. Also, you are quite mistaken in thinking that he will detest any of you."

"We shall see," answered Harry, smiling. "At all events, don't push Lady Constance into Mr. Sotheran's arms before you know what your fate is to be."

"I shall tell her the exact truth," I said. "I shall tell her that my uncle has sent for you."

"Including my anticipations as to the result ?"

"Oh yes, if you like. Now I must be off. Am I to be allowed to shake hands with Paulina before I go ?"

“By all means,” answered Harry. “I’ll go into the house and fetch her.”

However, he returned presently, saying he was sorry that his wife was not visible. “She has worked herself up into a state of excitement over this business, and the consequence is that she is lying down now with a splitting headache. I’ll say good-bye to her for you.”

I returned to town, meditating over Harry’s advice, which seemed to be well-meant, and wondering what Lady Constance would say to it all. I expected to meet her at a dinner-party that evening; but when the time came she failed to make her appearance, having, as subsequently transpired, sent an excuse at the last moment. I was not sorry for this respite, as I thought matters might be more comfortably discussed in Hill Street, whither I repaired as early as possible on the following afternoon.

The door was opened, after some little delay, by a young man in plain clothes, who looked as if I had interrupted him in the act of brushing the powder out of his hair. It appeared to me that he was struggling with a smile, as he said briskly—“Ladyship’s left town, sir.”

“By Jove!” I ejaculated involuntarily; and then I proceeded to ask when Lady Constance had left, and how soon her return might be looked for.

“Not coming back at all, sir,” replied the ex-footman, evidently much enjoying my discomfiture. “Her ladyship left yesterday morning for the Continent.”

I was so astounded that I turned, without another word, and should have walked away, if I had not at this moment become aware of the slow and majestic approach of a well-known white waistcoat. I could not refuse myself the pleasure of watching Mr. Sotheran’s demeanour under the blow which was about to fall upon him, and I stood aside as he mounted the steps.

He recognised me with much affability—“How do you do, Mr. Maxwell, how do you do? Warm afternoon, is it not?”—and marched on unsuspectingly to receive his sentence from the lips of the servant, who was now grinning delightedly.

For a moment he was evidently staggered. His eyes became as large and round as those

of the First Dog in the fairy-tale of the Tinder-box ; his jaw fell, and he gasped out, " Eh ? — what ? — gone abroad ? " But presently he regained his customary phlegmatic calm and drew out his card-case, merely observing, " I had an appointment with Lady Constance for this afternoon."

" Indeed, sir ? Dear me, sir ! " said the young man, upon whose manners sudden emancipation from the shackles of livery seemed to have produced a deleterious effect.

Mr. Sotheran frowned at him heavily. " I presume that you are no longer in Lady Constance's service," said he. " Has she broken up her establishment, pray ? "

" Yes, sir. We was took by surprise, having been given to understand as we should be wanted for another month at least."

" Well, you got a month's wages, I suppose," said Mr. Sotheran shortly. " What is Lady Constance's present address ? "

" Her ladyship didn't leave no address, sir."

" Nonsense ! " returned Mr. Sotheran ; " she must have left some address for her letters."

The young man said he would inquire, and

came back, after a short absence, with the somewhat startling information that letters were to be forwarded to Poste Restante, Constantinople.

Mr. Sotheran and I walked down the street together, community of misfortune making us almost friends for the time being.

"This is a bad job," I remarked. "She has gone to have a look at the war, of course."

"No doubt she has," agreed my companion. "Yes; no doubt that will be it. It is, as you say, an unfortunate freak, and one that may be attended, I fear, with considerable risk. The last accounts of the cholera are most alarming. I almost question," he continued, speaking rather to himself than to me, "whether I should not do well to follow her."

"I hope to goodness you won't do that!" I exclaimed. And when he asked me why he should not, I answered, not very civilly, "Oh, well, you might get the cholera yourself, you know."

"I should not allow myself to be deterred by any fears of that kind," said Mr. Sotheran.

"But might you not allow yourself to be

deterred by fear of intruding where you were not wanted?" I suggested; for, not being able to go to Constantinople myself, I was unwilling to allow my rival so great an advantage over me.

"My young friend," said Mr. Sotheran, not unkindly, "you are of course aware of the hopes that I entertain with regard to Lady Constance. I have been told, and I believe that there is a foundation of truth in the rumour, that you yourself have similar hopes. Will you allow me to advise you, in all good faith and sincerity, to dismiss any such vague notions from your mind? The fact is that you have not the ghost of a chance against me."

"You are very modest!" cried I, laughing, "How can you possibly tell what my chance may be?"

"Don't misunderstand me," went on Mr. Sotheran; "I am far from asserting that Lady Constance may not prefer your society to mine. But when it comes to so serious a question as that of marriage, I have advantages over you which every man and woman of the world must at once see and admit. I have reason to believe that Lady Constance does admit them."

So had I ; but I didn't say so. I contented myself with observing that Lady Constance was not always and altogether influenced by considerations of worldly wisdom.

"I think, however, that she will prove to be so in the present instance," Mr. Sotheran rejoined. "So far as I am concerned, you are very welcome to try your best with her ; but I warn you that you will be disappointed. I have, in short, made up my mind to succeed," he concluded calmly.

"And do you consider that an infallible recipe for success ?" I inquired.

Mr. Sotheran paused for a moment before replying. "Well, I have failed in some things, like most men ; but that has always been when I have attempted a task beyond my powers. This task is within my powers, and I have no fear of failure. I have been perfectly open with you, Mr. Maxwell," he added ; "because, in spite of the—may I say juvenile petulance?—with which you have sometimes treated me, I like you, and because I think it is a pity that you should waste your time in the pursuit of shadows. Believe me, you will do very well

without Lady Constance Milner. I will even go further, and say that, in my humble opinion, Lady Constance is not good enough for you. I am by no means blind to her defects, I can assure you ; but the difference between us is that you will outgrow your present fancy, whereas I am too old to change. Good evening to you. Think over what I have said."

And Mr. Sotheran turned into Brooks', while I walked on, somewhat nettled, but with an increased respect for my elderly rival. I soon banished him and his warning from my thoughts, however, and fell to busying myself with conjectures as to the cause of Lady Constance's flight. Debt—satiety—caprice—any one of these might have sufficed to send her off on her travels again, and it was quite in accordance with her habits to disappear without taking formal leave of her friends. Yet I thought that she might have made an exception in favour of one of them, and as soon as I reached home, I wrote her a letter in which I gave pathetic expression to this sentiment. Remembering that we had parted almost in anger, I implored her to forgive me, if I had been so unfortunate

as to incur her displeasure; I begged her at least to let me know what her movements were likely to be; but, after considering of it, I decided not to bring forward the subject of my cousin's resuscitation. Such an announcement at such a time might be fatal; and if Mr. Sotheran carried out his threat of following her to the East, there was no saying what she might not be brought to consent to in a moment of despondency.

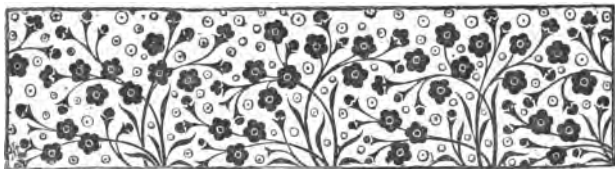
When I had finished and despatched my letter, I surprised myself whistling in a light-hearted manner, and asked myself sternly what I meant by such conduct. I ought to have been weeping and tearing my hair. I had been deceived—more or less deceived, at all events—by my friend; I had been deserted by the object of my affections; I had been calmly defied by a formidable rival; and I was about to be disinherited by my uncle. Why, then, in Heaven's name, should I feel like a schoolboy let out for a holiday?

Being unable to reply to these pertinent questions, either then or the next day, when the same unaccountable gaiety of spirits took posses-

sion of me, I felt drawn towards obtaining the opinion of an unprejudiced person upon my case ; and so it came about that, exactly twenty-four hours after the disappointment which I had met with in Hill Street, I was ringing the door-bell of Mrs. Saville's house in Portman Square.

Mrs. Saville, I was informed, had gone out driving, but further inquiry produced the pleasant intelligence that Miss Dennison was at home and would see me. Under which circumstances, I devoutly hoped that Mrs. Saville's drive might be a prolonged one.





CHAPTER VII.

LADY CONSTANCE MAKES A FINAL CONCESSION.

It was an immense comfort to me to be able to talk openly to Maud without betraying any one's confidence. I made her acquainted with all the circumstances relating to my first meeting with Harry, to our subsequent friendship, and to my discovery of his wife and child, not forgetting the episode of Mrs. Farquhar's visit to Richmond and Harry's explanation of his conduct upon that occasion; and when I had done, she observed that, for a diplomatist, I did not seem to be very quick at distinguishing honest men from rogues.

That Harry was not a rogue, and a very clever one too, she declined to believe. "The whole thing is as clear as daylight," she said. "He has contrived to get what he wants without any assistance from you, because it would

not at all suit his book to be indebted to your generosity, and I have no doubt that it is he who has traduced you to your uncle. My only hope is that Mr. Le Marchant may be a little less blind than you. You had better leave them alone, I think, for the present; there can be no use in your going to Thirlby now that matters have reached such a pass."

But although Maud scolded me more than was quite just, and although she had some searching questions to put to me about Lady Constance, whose unexpected departure I was obliged to mention, I spent the best part of an hour so agreeably with her that I walked away at last, thinking to myself that perhaps such visits might not be altogether wise. Upon calmer reflection, however, I perceived that, if Maud's vicinity stirred up memories and regrets within me, there was nothing very alarming in that, nor indeed anything new. I had regretted my infidelity to her all along; I should, doubtless, continue to regret it to the end of my days; but regrets were hardly likely to change either her or me. The romance of my boyhood was dead and buried—so deeply buried that Maud seemed

actually to have forgotten that it had ever had any existence. I might perhaps at one time have had a chance of winning her love ; but I had thrown that chance away finally and irrevocably. There remained to me her friendship, of which I should be exceedingly foolish to deprive myself, seeing that I had not precisely a plethora of disinterested friends in the world.

Fortified by these convictions, I did not hesitate to dine in Portman Square, as I was invited to do a few days later ; and, after that, finding Mrs. Saville and her daughter disposed to be amiable, I spent a good deal of my spare time in their house. After the first few days, Maud and I spoke little of Thirlby and of what was going on there. She yielded a reluctant assent to my proposition that the subject was one which had already been more than sufficiently talked over ; and indeed the home news that reached us was of the most meagre description. My uncle wrote much as usual, scarcely alluding to the circumstance that his family circle had been increased ; although he asked me to try and find him a Shetland pony of docile character, suitable for a child learning to ride ;—an order

which seemed significant. As for Harry, he did not write at all.

Nor did any letter reach me from the East. Once or twice I encountered Mr. Sotheran, which was proof positive that he had thought better of his intention to pursue Lady Constance; but on these occasions he only nodded to me without speaking, and I did not ask him whether he had any news of the absentee, feeling tolerably certain that he had none.

The London season, meanwhile, was drawing to its close. Parliament sat late that year; but the dearth of entertainments, added to the alarm of cholera, drove away most of those who could leave town before the end of July; and Mrs. Saville followed the stream, taking Maud with her. During the two or three weeks that followed I had a great deal of my own company, and very dull company I found it. My anxiety about Lady Constance, which had slumbered peacefully enough while Maud had been in London, woke up again and pestered me day and night. If I had known at all where to look for her, I might have been tempted to spend the month of leave which was all that an exacting

country would allow me in making a dash for the seat of war ; but as there was an even probability of Lady Constance's being by that time fomenting sedition at Warsaw, or stirring up a clearer conception of the political crisis in the breast of a philosophical potentate at Berlin, I abandoned the idea of engaging in any such wild-goose chase. Moreover, the path of duty plainly led towards Norfolk.

Three quarters of the month of August had passed slowly away, and I was in the act of packing my portmanteau one evening, preparatory to a move homewards on the morrow, when a note was brought to me which, on being opened, proved to contain only the following laconic command :—" Come and see any time after eight o'clock to-night at Claridge's Hotel.— C. M."

Lady Constance had returned, then ! I gazed at the paper which bore the evidence of her presence in London with somewhat mixed feelings. Of course I was overjoyed at the thought of seeing her once more, and very glad that she had arrived just in time to catch me before my departure for Thirlby ; but the thought which

did not overjoy me at all was that of the long-deferred statement that I should have to make that evening. Still, it was impossible to foresee what Lady Constance's views might be upon any given subject, and it was some comfort that I had my uncle's authority for assuring her that no irrevocable settlement had as yet been decided upon.

I was at Claridge's at five minutes past eight, and was shown without delay into Lady Constance's sitting-room, where I found her still in her travelling dress, answering letters, of which a large heap lay open upon the table before her. She glanced up as I made my entrance, but did not move or offer me her hand. "Is that you?" she said. "Sit down and read the papers; I shall be ready for you in a few minutes."

I was too familiar with her peculiarities to resent this cold welcome. I did as she bade me, and for some little time there was silence, except for the scratching of her pen, as she dashed off and addressed note after note, apparently oblivious of my presence. I scrutinised her features, upon which the light of a shaded lamp fell, and and it struck me that her journey had not done

her much good. She looked paler than usual and more careworn, and from time to time she pressed her hand upon her temples, as though her head ached. At length she threw down her pen and requested me to ring the bell, and, Antonio appearing presently in answer to the summons, she handed her pile of letters to him, telling him to have them posted. Then she got up, and took a chair nearer to the one upon which I was seated.

"Well," she began; "did you think you had seen the last of me?"

"I didn't think it would be quite so bad as that," answered I; "but I have been feeling very uneasy about you lately, I confess. Did you get my letter?"

"Your letter? Oh, you mean the one that you wrote directly after I started. Yes; it reached me; but you know I never answer letters unless I am obliged."

"Why did you go off like that?" I asked reproachfully. "I don't think it was very kind of you."

"Ought I to have asked your permission first? I should have let you know that I was going;

but I couldn't tell that you would allow twenty-four hours to pass without coming to see me, and I found it quite impossible to wait. I am not like most people, who grow gradually weary of their surroundings: a disgust for places seizes upon me all of a sudden, and then I feel that it is a case for immediate departure or self-destruction. You would not have liked to find me on the drawing-room floor in Hill Street with my throat cut."

"No; but you might have sent me a line to say that you were leaving, and to give me an opportunity of bidding you good-bye. Then at least I should have heard what part of the world you were bound for."

"I didn't think of it. I apologise. It seems, however, that you did discover my destination."

"Only by chance. I was so astonished at hearing of your departure that I was going away without asking any more questions, when Mr. Sotheran came up and, with great presence of mind, demanded your address."

"Ah, yes. He also favoured me with a long letter."

"Which I trust you didn't answer."

“Yes, I did. He wished to know whether I intended to keep my promise of visiting some neighbours of his during the autumn, and he said he should pursue me to Turkey or elsewhere if he did not receive a speedy reply. So I wrote to tell him that he might expect me back in England before September. I thought it unnecessary to take that precaution in your case, as you had not held out the same threat.”

“I suppose that means that you wanted to be rid of both of us.”

“I can’t contradict you. There are times when one wants to be rid of everybody, one’s self included. In a general way, I should say that any one who was tired of life could not do better than go to Constantinople at the present time ; but I have the constitution of an ostrich, and I suffered from nothing worse than a prolonged attack of the blues. Then I went to Varna and had a look at the allied armies, by way of raising my spirits. They are dying like so many flies, and though they talk of invading the Crimea and taking Sebastopol, the knowing people say that a peace will be patched up and the whole expedition will collapse. When I had seen and heard

enough horrors to satisfy me for the rest of my days, I retreated to Vienna; after which I looked in upon my brother at Franzenshöhe—who begged me to say all sorts of kind things to you, by-the-by—and so I made my way back to London. Now you have heard the history of my doings, and it is your turn to speak. Have you made up your quarrel with Miss Dennison yet?”

“I never had any quarrel with her,” I answered.

“No? But are you engaged to be married to her?”

“I don’t think you need ask that question,” said I. “If you don’t understand that I shall never marry anybody, unless, by some miracle, it should be yourself, I am sorry for it; but I can hardly say or do anything more than I have done to convince you.”

“She is a very pretty girl,” observed Lady Constance abstractedly. “I remember making you quite hot and angry at the Opera by some disparaging remarks about her, which were not in the least sincere. The vulgar belief that a plain woman is always jealous of a pretty one is perfectly correct, like most vulgar beliefs, whatever assertions may be made to the contrary.”

"You, at all events, are not plain, and need not be jealous of anybody," I remarked.

"Ah," said Lady Constance, smiling, "I see you have realised the truth of another vulgar aphorism, that you can never go wrong in telling a woman that she is pretty. Stick to that rule, and you will do well. I presume you have been to see Miss Dennison since that night."

"Of course I have," answered I. "We are very old friends; and though I was in love with her once, she never was at all in love with me. You don't mind my seeing her, do you?"

Lady Constance laughed outright. "Why should I mind? The miracle hasn't occurred yet, you know. Now tell me some more news, if you have any to tell."

"I have one thing to tell you," I replied, eager to acquit myself of my task and have done with it; "but I don't know whether it will interest you. You remember the story of that cousin of mine who was sent away from home in disgrace, and whom I was in a sort of way supposed to have replaced? Well, my uncle has almost made up his mind to pardon him. At least, Harry has been staying at Thirlby for some

weeks upon trial, as it were, and I believe I may look upon it as tolerably certain now that I shall never be one of the landed gentry of Norfolk."

Lady Constance, who had, up to this point, been lying back with her eyes half closed, and had spoken in a weary, apathetic tone, sat up in her chair now and looked at me anxiously. "Do you mean to say," she asked, "that you have been so insane as to put this man in your place?"

I explained that my cousin's restoration was due to no efforts made by me on his behalf, but simply to the fact that he had a wife and child, of whose existence my uncle had until lately been ignorant.

"A wife and child!" repeated Lady Constance; "this sounds serious. What sort of a wife, and what sort of a child?"

"His wife," answered I, "is a very good sort of woman in her way; but she is not a lady, and I am afraid she will never be made to resemble one. The boy, of course, can be sent to school and formed, like other boys."

"H'm! I wouldn't give a five-pound note for your chances. Let me see; what was it that cousin of yours did? Was it forgery?"

"No; I am sorry to say it was cheating at cards," I answered. "But this happened a good many years ago, and——"

"Ah, I remember now," interrupted Lady Constance. "That man Chapman told me the whole history; but I did not attend particularly to what he said. Probably he knew very little about it."

"He ought to know as much about it as anybody," I observed. "I am free to disclose now that his name is not Chapman, but Harry Le Marchant. It was his own history that he told you."

Lady Constance started visibly, and I asked her, laughing, whether she was very much astonished.

"I am indeed!" she said; "I am astonished beyond measure. I have always been told, and I have always believed, that it takes a sharp man to make a fool of me; but your gifted cousin has successfully accomplished that feat. He must be a very finished rascal. I wonder now, what interest he had in taking me in!"

"I don't think his assuming a false name was so very unnatural," I remarked.

"I was not thinking about his name. What

I should like to arrive at his motive for having urged me to marry you."

"If he did that," said I, "I believe it was out of pure good-will."

"So I should think!" returned Lady Constance sarcastically. "I never did the wretched creature an injury," she went on. "On the contrary, I always paid him well, and I was more polite to him than ninety-nine people out of a hundred would have been; and yet, knowing all the time that he intended to cut you out, he actually had the audacity to tell me in so many words that your expectations were as assured as anybody's in the kingdom!"

"It looks rather awkward, I admit," said I; "but the explanation is simple enough. He never believed that my uncle would be induced to overlook his offence; and indeed I don't know that he wished very much to be forgiven."

I then entered into a few details touching the peculiarities of Harry's position and the views which he entertained with regard to it; but these failed to move Lady Constance, who merely reiterated her conviction that my cousin was a scoundrel of a very perfect order.

"If you had only heard him!" she exclaimed. "He came to me with a thousand apologies—felt that he was taking a liberty which nothing but my generosity could excuse, and so forth, and so forth; but you had been so kind to him, and I had been so kind to him, and, in short, he would rather run the risk of offending me than that our joint lives should be spoilt through any misconception of the true facts of the case. Was it sheer mischief and spite, I wonder, or did he really think that he could profit in some way by our marriage?"

"I am quite sure he did not," said I.

"Don't be too sure. If it were worth investigating, I fancy we should find that there was a practical aim under all that emotion, though I confess I don't at present see what it could be. One can't help being a little amused at the fellow's impudence. Still, it was very nearly ending in a joke which we should have found it rather difficult to laugh at. I may admit that, now that it is all over."

"I suppose it is all over," said I, looking down at the carpet.

Lady Constance made no reply, and for some

minutes there was silence between us. When I looked up, I saw that there was a red spot on each of her cheeks, and that she was twisting and turning the rings upon her fingers nervously. I drew a little nearer to her, and said :

“I wish I knew whether you really cared for me at all. If you do, I believe, upon my honour and conscience, that you would be happier married to me, a poor man, than to Mr. Sotheran, or some other millionaire. I shall have a thousand a year—perhaps a little more, and you, I suppose, have something. You smile at the idea of marrying upon such a pittance ; yet how many hundreds of people do it, and live decently enough ? Ought you not to think again before you decide to turn me away ?”

Lady Constance made no direct answer. “You don’t plead very passionately,” she remarked.

“Would it make any difference if I did ?” asked I.

“Perhaps not ; but it would lend an air of reality to the situation. You don’t like me to laugh when you intimate that we might marry upon a thousand a year ; but really, if you will

think of it, it is much better to laugh a little, and the proposition is rather a funny one in itself. Do you know what my yearly dress-maker's bill amounts to? But never mind!—under the circumstances, we are not called upon to consider items. Just examine yourself strictly and honestly for a minute or two, and then tell me whether you are serious in suggesting that two such people as you and I should set up house upon a thousand a year, or even upon twice that amount."

I endeavoured to comply with her request; but it was not so easy to say exactly what I thought. What I did say at last was—"The whole question depends upon the feeling that you may have for me. No one likes to be poor, yet there are worse things than poverty."

"When I first knew you," rejoined Lady Constance, "you had a simplicity of thought and speech which was very delightful; but I am afraid you are becoming corrupted. Your answer is nothing but a prevarication, and you know it."

"And you?" I returned, with some warmth, "are you so straightforward? I tried to give

you as honest an answer as the case admits of, but you will give me no answer at all. Tell me at least one thing: do you intend to marry Mr. Sotheran?"

"As matters have fallen out, it is extremely probable that I shall," she replied.

"Then," cried I, "you are deliberately choosing a life which you know beforehand must be miserable! Is there no way of saving you?"

She shook her head. "None, I am afraid. But I will make one concession—a final one. If, within a few weeks' time, you are able to tell me that your uncle has dismissed his son, I, on my side, will dismiss Mr. Sotheran. I think that ought to satisfy you."

It was the old temptation; but I was no longer scared by it. The guidance of events had, happily, passed out of my hands, and I saw in Lady Constance's proposal only a means of gaining time and an enlarged field laid open to chance.

"Is that a bargain, then?" she asked presently. "You shall write to me when you can speak positively as to the future. Or, perhaps, you had better see me. You know my cousins,

the Fitzpatricks, do you not? I am going to stay with them in Yorkshire on the 10th of September, and you can join me there between that and the 15th."

"But they haven't asked me," I objected.

"I will manage that. Now I won't keep you any longer. Remember me to your cousin, and tell him what a genuine admiration I feel for his talents."

She rang the bell as she spoke; and in the presence of the grave Antonio, who immediately appeared, I could only bid her a formal farewell.





CHAPTER VIII.

THE GENERAL USES STRONG LANGUAGE.

ONE of those fugitive shocks of surprise which makes one doubt for an instant whether one is awake or asleep awaited me on my arrival at Thirlby Station. As the train drew up beside the platform I saw in the roadway outside an old gentleman on a bay horse, and by his side, on a Shetland pony, a little boy, so exactly the counterpart of my former self, that I was fain to rub my eyes with some faint expectation that he would presently vanish into thin air. But the little boy stood this test, and remained a visible palpable personage, seated out there on his pony in the autumn sunshine. His nether limbs were clad in untanned leather leggings (how well I remembered those old leggings!); his left hand held his reins and a short hunting-crop; his right was resting upon his pony's crupper, as he

leant back to talk to his companion in an attitude which I myself had been wont to assume in days gone by. I used to think that this pose showed an easy familiarity with all the conditions of horsemanship; possibly my successor had formed a similar opinion.

"Jimmy and I have come to meet you, you see, Charley," said my uncle. And then, just for one moment, I felt a sharp twinge of jealousy. That Harry could never supplant me in the old man's affections I well knew; but, somehow or other, it had not struck me before that the boy might very well do so; and now, when I saw them together, I could not help saying to myself that this was a little more than I had bargained for.

"We thought you would rather ride than drive, and we have brought the brown cob for you," my uncle went on. He spoke very gently, and when I glanced up at him, I saw an anxious, deprecating look in his kind old face. He just touched my shoulder with his hand, saying, "Jimmy is not such a good rider as you used to be." He had read my thoughts at once, and, understanding what his were, I made haste to reassure him by a nod.

Jimmy, who all this time had been gasping with eagerness to obtain a hearing, now burst forth into a clamorous welcome which relieved the meeting of all its temporary awkwardness.

"Oh, Cousin Charley, I'm so awfully glad you've come! We shall have rare larks now! Bunce says I may go out shooting with you, if you'll let me, and I can ride first-rate, can't I, grandfather? Just look at this."

And he administered a smart blow over the hind-quarters to his pony, who squealed and flung up his heels—the result being a considerable exhibition of daylight between Jimmy's person and his saddle. "I often make him do that," he said complacently. "It gets one accustomed to the feeling, you know."

"But you mustn't thrash your pony without any reason, my boy," remonstrated my uncle.

"Oh, Lord bless your soul, *he* don't mind!" returned Jimmy; "he knows it's all fun. I say, Cousin Charley," he went on, "will you teach me how to jump? Grandfather said I wasn't to try till you came."

"All right," said I; "I'll give you some lessons. Canter on ahead now, and let us see how you sit."

We had ridden away from the station by this time, and I sent Jimmy on in front not so much in order to criticise his seat as to get the opportunity of saying a word or two to my uncle.

"He isn't a bad little chap, is he?" I began, as soon as the boy was out of ear-shot.

"He is a good boy and a plucky boy, thank God!" replied my uncle. "He seems to have associated with some odd companions, and he has picked up a few expressions which are hardly suited for the drawing-room; but he is so quick that I dare say he will soon learn the manners of civilised society. Shall we trot on after him now? I don't like him to be left quite alone."

It was evident that my uncle did not wish to be questioned. I forbore, therefore, to make any inquiries about Harry, and we pushed on towards the house, Jimmy undertaking the lion's share of the conversation.

As we approached, four persons strolled across the lawn to meet us. First came the General, then Mrs. Farquhar and Paulina, finally Harry, with his hands in his pockets and a straw hat on the back of his head. All these, with the exception of Mrs. Farquhar, whose manner was cold and

distant, welcomed me as cordially as I could have wished ; but I had a disagreeable sensation of being treated like a guest in my own home, and I availed myself of the first pretext to slip away to the stables, where I was greeted with a silent and respectful sympathy scarcely less hard to bear than Mrs. Farquhar's politeness. Abdications would perhaps be more frequent if they did not almost necessarily imply exile.

I confess that I had some bitter thoughts to keep me company while I dressed for dinner. I loved Thirlby, as I suppose that every one must love the home of his childhood, and I had only just realised that Thirlby could never be my home any more. As long as my uncle lived, I should, no doubt, be free to use his house as my own ; but it would not be in his power to give me the privileges of an heir-presumptive. An heir-apparent had replaced me. It was he who would henceforth give instructions to Bunce (not that Bunce ever obeyed instructions ; but that was neither here nor there). It was he who would receive the neighbours—supposing always that the neighbours consented to receive him. It was to him that the tenants, the gar-

dener, and the bailiff would address themselves with regard to those minor matters which had hitherto fallen within my province, while I must stand and look on. I am not, that I know of, less magnanimous than another; but I felt that such a state of things would be simply intolerable, and that the same roof could not long shelter Harry and me. I went downstairs, however, resolved to put a good face upon it and to let no one detect the mortification of which I was very properly ashamed.

Only Mrs. Farquhar and Paulina were in the drawing-room when I entered. The latter, arrayed in a brilliant blue silk dinner-dress, trimmed with Limerick lace, was sitting bolt upright upon the edge of her chair and twirling her thumbs. Poor Paulina's hands were large and red, and the disproportionate amount of wrist characteristic of the lower middle class of Great Britain was rendered more conspicuous in her case by absence of bracelets, or of any black-velvet substitute for them. Mrs. Farquhar was evidently in the act of administering a lecture.

"My dear, you must allow me to tell you that it is a wife's duty to influence her husband

for good. I'm not saying that I would force a man to attend service twice in the day against his will ; but to walk up and down the high-road on Sunday morning, with a shooting-coat on his back and a cigar in his mouth, while the people are coming out of church, is just indecent ; and it is your duty to make him see it."

Paulina threw an appealing glance at me. "You tell her, sir—Charles, I mean," she said. "There's no use of me talking. I'm sure I've done my best with Harry ; but if he won't go to church, he won't—and that's all about it."

I was preparing a little speech which should be pleasant to both parties ; but, before I could open my lips, Mrs. Farquhar turned upon me with——

"Oh, I wouldn't expect *you* to advocate church-going. I'm told that you and your friends spend the Sunday in paying and receiving visits."

It struck me that, if I was to be badgered by Mrs. Farquhar all the evening, I might lose that aspect of serenity which I was anxious to maintain, and I thought perhaps it would be the best to take the bull by the horns without further

delay ; so I said : " Mrs. Farquhar, suppose we conclude a treaty of peace. You have carried your point, or your point has been carried without your aid ; I am out of the running, and you will do no good to anybody by saying disagreeable things to me. I make you welcome to call me anything you like when my back is turned ; but so long as I am in the room, let us be civil to one another. I am sure you are far too sensible to flog a dead horse."

This appeal was not, perhaps, couched in the most judicious possible terms ; but it had the merit of putting the case plainly, and I think most people would have seen the advisability of avoiding needless bickerings. But Mrs. Farquhar was not like most people.

"The man's demented !" she exclaimed contemptuously. " I never say disagreeable things to any one."

Paulina broke into a short, startling laugh, which she checked abruptly.

"What I have said of you," Mrs. Farquhar continued, with dignity, " I maintain to be true ; and if you find it disagreeable, it must be because your own conscience accuses you. As a

Christian woman I am bound to protest against Sunday visiting——”

“Quite right—quite right!” struck in the General, who entered the room at this moment. “We have six days in the week for work and play, and we oughtn’t to go poaching on the seventh.”

“You remind me of the Devil quoting Scripture, Tom,” said Mrs. Farquhar, ungratefully. “I would rather see you practise than hear you preach.”

“Well, well,” muttered the General, looking rather disconcerted, “I’m afraid we’re none of us what we ought to be. Charley, come and look at this clearing they have made in the shrubbery; I think it’s an improvement.” And, beckoning me towards the window, he whispered, “For goodness’ sake, keep the peace, if you can. I’ve been feeling as if I was smoking in a powder-magazine ever since I came down here.”

Harry joined us before I could ask for any explanation; but when we went in to dinner, I was able to see for myself that the elements of an explosion were not lacking. During that long and most uncomfortable meal Mrs. Farquhar

surpassed herself. Not one of us, except Harry, escaped attack ; not one of us was suffered to make the most innocent remark without prompt and flat contradiction ; and the luckless Paulina was snubbed and lectured after a fashion which Job himself would not have tolerated. What possessed the old lady to behave in this way I don't know. Perhaps she was beginning to perceive that her great scheme was not turning out a success ; perhaps she merely wanted to stir up an argument ; perhaps she was exasperated by the meekness with which we received her assaults.

It is probable that we should have been less meek if we had not felt that a spark would be sufficient to blow us all sky-high. Paulina was evidently controlling herself only by strenuous efforts, and of the men I declare I don't know which was the most ill at ease. The General's nervousness displayed itself by forced laughter and irrelevant anecdotes ; my uncle's was apparent in total silence and loss of appetite ; while Harry's took the most objectionable form of all. I had seen him in awkward situations before—as, for instance, at Lord Rossan's dinner table—and

he had always extricated himself from them with perfect ease and *aplomb*; but now these useful qualities seemed to have quite deserted him, and he contrived to do everything that he ought not to have done. He talked too loudly; he asserted himself a great deal too much; he complained that the sherry was corked, and sent Cooper for a fresh bottle, to which, when it was brought, he devoted himself more assiduously than was prudent; and all the time he kept glancing furtively at his father, as if he half expected to be ordered out of the room. By the time that the ladies had left us, he had worked himself up into a condition of pot-valiance which found expression in the most ill-judged familiarities, and at last he forgot himself so far as to ask me, with a wink, whether I had had "any news of her ladyship."

Shortly after this my uncle, who had not once looked at or spoken to his son, withdrew, and reappeared no more that evening; and when we reached the drawing-room we found that Paulina also had retired.

"If this sort of thing goes on," whispered the General to me, while Harry was talking to Mrs.

Farquhar, "I shall have to kick that fellow—I know I shall!"

"Has it been like this all along?" I asked, in the same low voice.

"Pretty much the same—not quite so bad, perhaps. Your arrival has put their backs up, I expect. We shall have the devil's own delight before very long, you'll see. If my mother goes on nagging at the barmaid, it's my belief that she will have a knife put into her; there's a suppressed ferocity about that woman that I don't like. As for the pitiful little beast over there, hang me if I'll put up with much more of *his* impudence to please anybody!"

"Let us keep our temper whatever happens," I urged. "I never saw Harry behave in this way before, and I think he has lost his head a little. Does my uncle never take the smallest notice of him? It seems to me that the poor fellow is simply terrified."

"Terrified?—sherryfied, you mean!" growled the General. "Look here, Charley, I want to talk to you. Come into the billiard-room, and let us have a quiet cigar."

But we were destined to have no quiet con-

versation that evening; for Harry, who seemed nervously anxious not to let me out of his sight, insisted on accompanying us to the billiard-room, and, when there, made himself pleasant by saying:

"Now don't you get talking secrets, you two. I'll tell you what: I'll play you a game of billiards, old cock, and give you twenty in a hundred."

"I'll thank you not to address me in that way, sir," called out the General fiercely. "In point of fact, if ever you dare to take such a liberty again, I'll catch hold of you by the scruff of your neck and the seat of your trousers, and chuck you out of the nearest window, sir."

"Wha—what the deuce is the matter with the old fool?" stammered Harry, as the General strode away, slamming the door after him. "Never mind, we've got rid of him anyhow. Come on, Charley, you and I can play evens, I suppose."

"I don't think you are in a state to play billiards without cutting the cloth," I answered. "You had much better go to bed."

He stared at me stupidly for a few moments,

frowning and trying to collect his senses, "All right, old fellow, all right," he said at last. "I know I've had a glass too much; but I don't care! You won't get me out of this again in a hurry, I can tell you. I hold two trumps, don't you see?—the old lady and the boy. Got any cards to beat those? Pay up, then, and look pleasant!"

He walked out of the room, chuckling to himself, and muttering, "Pay up, and look pleasant—look pleasant!"

In this agreeable manner my first evening at home came to an end.

Neither Harry nor Paulina appeared at breakfast the next morning, and I devoutly hoped that the former might be suffering from a headache and a fit of repentance. His absence was a comfort, so far as it went; but we should have been a morose party had not Jimmy enlivened us with an amusing flow of babble. As soon as we had risen from the table he possessed himself of my arm, and requested to be taken out to shoot partridges forthwith; but the General interposed.

"No," said he; "I want your cousin Charley

to take a walk with me this morning ; afterwards you can do what you like with him."

"All right," answered the boy, "then I shall go out with grandfather."

The General and I walked across the dewy lawn in silence ; but when we were out in the park, and beyond risk of being overheard, my companion took up his parable. "Well, of all the infernal schemes that ever were hatched for turning things topsy-turvy, this strikes me as being the most uncalled-for ! What do you expect to be the result of it ?—that's what I want to know."

I confessed that I was in some doubt as to how it would all end.

"You ought never to have allowed it to begin !" cried the General peevishly. "What's the good of you if you can't make yourself heard on the side of order ? I'm devilish sorry for you, Charley ; but it seems to me that you have brought this upon yourself, and I tell you plainly I don't think you'll ever be squire of this parish now."

"I don't expect to be," answered I ; "and, except for one or two reasons, I don't wish to be.

I should be very well contented, if Harry would only behave himself."

"Behave himself! he'll behave himself as he always has done. Do you suppose his father didn't know what he was about when he turned him out of doors? He'll make ducks and drakes of the property as soon as he comes into it; and he won't have long to wait either; for he is killing my poor brother by inches."

"I hope not," said I.

"It's all very well for you to say you hope not," retorted the General; "but hoping till you're black in the face won't alter the fact. Some men might manage to put up with vulgarity and insolence on one side, and everlasting nagging on the other—I might put up with it—or rather, I should precious soon put a stop to it. But Bernard isn't made of that sort of stuff. He'll go on suffering in silence until one of these fine mornings he is found dead in his bed. It's—it's enough to make a man swear, by George!"

And the General proceeded to illustrate his assertion amply and satisfactorily.

For my own part, I should have been glad to get away and hear what my uncle had to say;

but I was not allowed to return to the house before two o'clock, by which time the whole party was assembled in the dining-room for luncheon.

Harry, looking pale and downcast, was more like himself, and a great deal less obnoxious than he had been on the previous evening. Paulina, on the other hand, was flushed and excited. The cause of this uneasiness upon her part explained itself to me when it transpired that we were all to attend a garden-party at the Welbys that afternoon. From various hints that were dropped I conjectured that this was the first public recognition of Harry and his wife vouchsafed by the county, and my surmise was converted into certainty by my uncle's whispering to me, as we left the room after luncheon, "I hope you won't mind being present at this function, Charley. I mean to go myself."

Now, as my uncle had not been seen at a garden-party within the memory of man, it was safe to conclude that the present occasion was no ordinary one, and I could only trust—though without any sanguine expectations—that we might all come out of the ordeal creditably.



CHAPTER IX.

PAULINA ENTERS SOCIETY.

A GARDEN-PARTY nowadays is only another name for a lawn-tennis party, and has developed—so far as a mere on-looker can judge—into a form of entertainment rather popular than otherwise. But thirty years ago there was no such relaxation to mitigate the severity of the outdoor gatherings held periodically by Sir Digby and Lady Welby, and when the nobility and gentry of East Norfolk met together in the grounds of Stanningham Hall, there was literally nothing for them to do but to sit or stand in groups on the lawn and survey one another patiently.

From time to time Sir Digby would approach one of the most important ladies of the district, and would say to her in a low, confidential voice, "I want to show you my *Lapageria alba*;" whereupon the two would pace gravely away

together towards the conservatory in which the exotic referred to was to be admired. The lady would generally return alone, and after a decent interval Sir Digby would be seen bearing down upon the matron next in rank, whom he would address in precisely identical terms. As a matter of fact, he neither knew nor cared anything about horticulture ; but probably he had a hazy notion that some attention ought to be shown to people, and in a moment of inspiration he had hit upon the above formula, which served him faithfully through many seasons.

The thought of Paulina making her *début* upon that solemn scene gave me a cold shiver all up my back, and when she entered the drawing-room, ready to start, with a flushed face, a Stuart tartan gown and a pair of yellow gloves much too small for her, I basely thanked my stars that there would be no room for me in the carriage, and that therefore I should be spared the agony of witnessing the sensation which her first appearance would cause.

She herself appeared to be in unaccountably high spirits, and was talking and laughing loudly ; but Harry looked the picture of misery, and my

uncle, though maintaining a calm exterior, was evidently apprehensive. Mrs. Farquhar wore a resolute air. I fancied that she proposed to carry off things with a high hand.

Presently they all drove away together in the old green barouche, Paulina's nodding plumes towering above the head of her protectress, and my uncle and Harry sitting with their backs to the horses; and as soon as they were gone the General and I, who had watched their departure from the doorstep, looked at one another and burst into hysterical laughter.

"There's nothing to crack your sides over in this, you know, Charley," remonstrated the General, recovering his gravity, as we set off to take the short cut across the fields. "We shall be laughing on the wrong side of our mouths before the day is over, unless I'm very much mistaken."

It seemed quite upon the cards that we might. Stanningham is a good two miles from Thirlby, and by loitering and pretending to mistake the way, one may occupy a considerable time in walking two miles; but we reached the lodge all too soon, and here my companion, in the shab-

biest way, declared his intention of deserting me.

"Can't help it," he said, in answer to my upbraidings. "Call me a coward, if you like; but not another step do I go, and that's flat! I may be wrong; but the way in which that Paulina woman was going on before she started inspired me with the gravest alarm."

"She was flurried," I observed, "and no wonder. But I think we may count upon her being awed into silence very soon after her arrival."

The General shook his head. "I doubt it," said he. "Shall I tell you what I think?" he added, bending forward, and speaking in low, impressive accents. "*I believe she's intoxicated!*"

And with this awful suggestion he turned and fled precipitately.

I walked on with a sinking sensation about the fourth button of my waistcoat. I did not myself share the General's scandalous suspicions; but I thought it quite possible that others, remarking Paulina's heightened colour and excited mien, might do so, and I knew that in no case

could she hope to be met in a spirit of friendliness.

When I emerged upon the lawn where the company was assembled, my worst anticipations were realised. Paulina, seated upon a garden-chair in a conspicuous position, was surrounded by an irregular semi-circle of grave, impassive ladies, who were surveying her much as if she had been some newly-imported variety of wild beast. What she had been saying or doing before my arrival I could only surmise; but there was no mistaking the fact that she had been sent to Coventry. She was now beating the ground impatiently with her foot, while in her eyes there gleamed the light of battle. From a short distance off, Harry, also completely isolated, was gazing at her with a look of stony horror upon his face. I perceived that, if the worst had not already happened, it was going to happen shortly.

My own appearance upon the scene gave the signal for a demonstration which greatly astonished me, until I realised what it meant. No sooner had I advanced from behind the clump of rhododendrons which had masked my pre-

liminary reconnaissance, than the entire company, as if by one consent, jumped up and marched upon me in a solid mass. There was a positive rush to shake me by the hand; I was overwhelmed with the kindest expressions of welcome; I was asked to dinner a dozen times in the space of less than five minutes. Gradually the signification of these generous greetings unfolded itself to me. Out of respect for my uncle, East Norfolk had consented to meet Mr. and Mrs. Harry Le Marchant; but they were not to be spoken to. A firm and united protest was to be entered against their restoration; and I, as the heir whom they had ousted, was to be made the subject of a distinct exhibition of sympathy.

I understood this, I say; but human nature is ever prone to self-love, and I will not deny that the sight of so many friendly faces and the sound of so many friendly words raised me for a minute or two almost up to the point of oblivion. But, chancing to meet my uncle's eyes, which were turned upon me with a certain look of grave regret, and catching sight, immediately afterwards, of Paulina glaring at me from the

background, I awoke to the fact that I was playing the enemy's game, and determined upon making one last despairing attempt to avert defeat.

I detached myself from my friends and approached Sir Digby Welby, who was standing apart, stroking his long nose, and doubtless meditating one of his periodical descents into the ladies' camp. He, like the others, received me with a double dose of cordiality, holding my hand and shaking it at intervals, while he expressed the pleasure that it gave him to see me amongst them again. Ordinarily he was a man of few words; but he evidently felt it incumbent upon him to say something now about the altered circumstances under which we met.

"I deplore this resolution of your poor uncle's," he began. "Although we have been friends for many years, I could not take upon me to tell him what I thought; but I very much fear that he is making a great mistake. I assure you that it went to my heart to purchase the Deepham farm from him, often as I have coveted that corner of land."

"As far as I know, that had nothing what-

ever to do with my cousin's return," said I. "At all events, he is here now, and I am sure that, for my uncle's sake, you will stretch a point to make his position tolerable."

"Oh, certainly," answered Sir Digby, with a touch of coldness; "but I confess that I hardly see——"

"Yes; I know you have invited them here, and that was very kind of you; but it would be very easy to do a little more. Don't you think, Sir Digby," I added persuasively, "that you might just step across the lawn and say a word or two to Mrs. Le Marchant?"

"I—well, I have already done so," answered Sir Digby, looking very much disinclined to oblige me.

"But if you were to do it again, it would produce a much greater effect. You need not stay beside her long; I only want people to notice that you are talking to her."

"Well, well," replied the worthy baronet, not unkindly; "I will endeavour to find some subject of conversation. But really it won't do—it will never do. And the sooner your uncle understands that, the less vexation he will have."

Sir Digby, in fulfilment of his promise, crossed the grass towards Paulina's chair with a slow, dignified step, I following him at a respectful distance.

"I want to show you my *Lapageria alba*," I heard him begin.

"Your *what*?" called out that misguided Paulina, accompanying her question with a short laugh.

"My *Lapageria alba*. If you will allow me to lead the way——"

"Oh, all right!" interrupted Paulina, jumping up with ostentatious alacrity, and speaking very loud. "I don't know what you are talking about; but I'm willing to look at anything, I'm sure. About time too, after being looked at myself for the best part of an hour!"

I began to think that Sir Digby was right, and that it really would never do. When the ill-matched couple had vanished into the conservatory, I drew a long breath of relief, feeling that, at any rate, the danger of some painful scene had been staved off, and I was debating whether I ought not to join Harry, who had now taken refuge, upon a distant bench, when I was accosted by Mr. Dennison.

The Rector's countenance wore an expression of the deepest concern. He said he had come to humble himself before me, and to confess the folly of his past conduct. "Father and son, you see—that's the way I looked at it—such a sad pity that they should be divided! How was I to know that the fellow had gone and married a barmaid? Dear, dear! what a bad job! The neighbours all turning up their noses too—and troubles at home—sure to be troubles at home! If I could only have foreseen this, I would have bitten out my tongue sooner than advise Le Marchant as I did!"

I assured the Rector that he might set his mind quite at rest. "Whatever your advice may have been, it was well meant," I said; "but I am perfectly certain that neither your advice nor any one else's has been taken. My uncle has yielded to circumstances, not to the advocacy of his friends. As to the neighbours turning up their noses, he must have been fully prepared for that. He told me long ago that they would never consent to receive Harry again."

"Yes, yes," returned the Rector, who perhaps did not relish being told that his counsel carried

so little weight ; “but being prepared for a thing is not liking it when it comes. I am prepared to be bullied by Mrs. Farquhar and the Ebenezer man ; but their attacks interfere with my digestion all the same. I say, Charley, do you think it is too late to undo all this mischief?”

“I am sure it is,” I answered. “You don’t understand that my uncle has never really changed his mind ; and he won’t change it now, unless some positive catastrophe occurs.”

“Then,” cried the Rector, “let us pray for a positive catastrophe ! You take it all in a very creditable spirit Charley,” he went on ; “but, at the same time, I think you are a little too supine—too supine. You must see that Le Marchant can’t possibly live in the same house with these people—perpetual quarrels and disturbances, you know—scandals too, very likely—oh, dear me, it’s not to be thought of ! I say, you ought to get them away, by hook or by crook. Let Harry be the heir, if he must be the heir ; but at least let him hide himself out of sight till his time comes.”

I was very much of the Rector’s way of thinking ; but I didn’t see why the burden of carrying

out his ideas should be thrown upon my shoulders in that jaunty manner, and I said I should be much obliged if he would kindly tell me how I was to accomplish Harry's expulsion.

"Oh, that I can't say," he replied; "but you ought to be able to manage it somehow. It's a question of money, I should think; the fellow will take a bribe to make himself scarce. But these are matters which women can judge of better than we can. Why don't you talk it over with Maud? Here she comes; and I know she wants to discuss things with you. Just wait here half a minute; I'll be with you again directly."

And the Rector hurried away to intercept his daughter, who at this moment came out of the house, attended by two or three of the local gilded youth. Apparently he had some little difficulty in shaking off these young gentlemen; but after a time he succeeded, and Maud walked across the lawn towards me with a smile of welcome upon her lips.

"My father says you are anxious to talk to me," she began, after we had shaken hands.

"I am always anxious to talk to you," I replied; "but, in the present instance, I believe

it is rather your father who wants you to talk to me. He thinks it desirable that Harry and his wife should be made to leave Thirlby, and he has taken it into his head that I am the man to bring this about. When I said that I didn't quite see how I was to set to work, he referred me with the utmost confidence to you."

"It strikes me," observed Maud, smiling, "that we have only to leave your cousin and his wife alone, and that they will accomplish their own destruction. If Mr. Le Marchant has not seen enough this afternoon to convince him that they are impracticable, he must be beyond the reach of conviction."

"I can answer for it that he won't turn them out of his house because the neighbours look coldly upon them," said I. "In fact, it is very unlikely that anything would persuade him to turn them out. Yet, if they stay, they will make his life into a perpetual purgatory, I am afraid. What I should like to arrange would be a sort of amicable separation; and, I think, if it were clearly understood that Harry was to come into the property eventually, he might consent to remove himself now."

"Very likely he would," answered Maud; "but you will get no help from me towards making an arrangement of that kind. If you are bent upon hanging yourself, you must fit the noose round your own neck as best you can; I shall not do it for you."

"Nevertheless," I remarked, "you would have a poor opinion of me if I took advantage of Paulina's unlucky exhibition to push my own interests."

Maud made an impatient gesture. "You should remember that you are not the only person concerned in this matter," she said. "As for your cousin, I have no sympathy whatever with him. I have taken every opportunity of watching him since I have been home, and I must say that he appears to me to be as contemptible a little wretch as ever lived."

"Well, for the sake of argument, let us admit that he is," answered I, thinking of what had taken place on the previous evening. "Still, when all is said, he is my uncle's son."

"I can't discuss the question in this public place," said Maud; "it's too long and complicated. Will you come over to the Rectory to-

morrow afternoon and see me? Or shall we meet somewhere? Perhaps the Broad would be the best place. I often walk down there in the evening about five o'clock, and we are not likely to be interrupted by anybody, except Bunce. Is that agreed, then?"

I should have preferred her naming any other trysting-place; and I could not repress a pang of regret that she should have no tender associations with a spot, which, in spite of all that had come and gone, must always remain sacred to me; but, as our interview was now interrupted by two of the young men above referred to, I could make no demurrer, and only nodded in answer to her inquiring look.

By this time Paulina had returned from the conservatory, having been forsaken by her host, whom I detected furtively consulting his watch behind a tree. Some of the people were already leaving; I saw with joy that our own carriage had come round from the stable-yard; the close of our trial was at hand; and for the short time that remained I thought I could not do better than engage Paulina in conversation. The attentions of Sir Digby had not availed to soothe

her anger, it appeared. She was pacing to and fro like a caged tigress, and swinging her parasol in a manner which suggested she would very much like to bring it down upon somebody's head. I drew nearer, and offered the innocent observation that the days were getting quite short.

"Don't talk to me like that!" shouted Paulina, turning upon me savagely. "Do you think I'm a stock or a stone to put up with such treatment as I've had this afternoon? I won't bear it!—no! not for Harry nor anybody! I tell you I won't bear it!" she repeated, with a stamp of her foot.

She looked so wild that I really believed she had lost her senses. I had always been given to understand that the proper way to deal with the insane is to quell them by a display of iron resolution and authority. I, therefore, fixed my eyes sternly upon those of my companion, and said :

"Listen to me, Paulina. Unless you command yourself and keep quiet, I shall put you into the carriage and have you driven straight home. If you have anything to complain of,

keep it until afterwards : you will not be allowed to make a disturbance here."

To my horror and amazement, she took two steps up to me and snapped her finger and thumb defiantly within half an inch of my nose. "Put me into the carriage, will you?" cried she. "It'd need a bigger man than you to do that, my fine fellow! I dare you to lay a finger upon me! Now then!"

What I should have done with this terrible woman I cannot imagine, if her husband had not providentially heard her voice from afar, and come hurrying up. "Leave her to me," he whispered. "For the Lord's sake, leave her to me, and take yourself off as quick as you can!"

I waited for no second invitation, but retired with more speed than dignity, promising myself that, so far as I was concerned, Paulina should be left to her lawful protector then and at all future times. When I looked round, the pair had already vanished, and I did not see them again until my uncle and Mrs. Farquhar came out of the house and got into the carriage, when they re-appeared—Paulina having by that

time subsided seemingly into a condition of stifled fury.

I never felt more relieved in all my life than when I saw them drive away. Harry remained behind, saying that he would walk home with me, if I had no objection. I replied, not over graciously, that he could if he liked; for I did not want his company, and I thought he would have been better employed in restraining his wife from tearing somebody to pieces. I hinted as much to him as we set off; but he answered, "She'll be quiet enough for the present;" and after that we pursued our way for some distance in silence.

I was feeling too disgusted and disheartened to talk; nor did my companion show any disposition to speak the first word. Thus we marched along side by side until we reached the confines of the park, when Harry remarked, abruptly:

"I suppose you understand all about it now."

It seemed best to have it out; so I said: "There's a good deal that I *don't* understand. I don't understand your conducting yourself at

your father's table as if you were in a pot-house, for instance."

"Suppose we put that on one side for the present. It was inexcusable, of course."

"Quite," said I, having no inclination to spare him.

"Very well; but what I was thinking of was the charming experience that we have just passed through; and I say that I suppose you understand now why I felt some hesitation about introducing Paulina to my family."

I observed that she certainly appeared to have an ungovernable temper.

"It isn't temper," answered Harry quietly; "it's drink."

So the General was right, after all! Being unable to find any comment that seemed suitable, I held my tongue, and by-and-by Harry resumed:

"Do you mean to say that you have never suspected it? I fancy you are about the only person in the house who has not, unless it is my grandmother, and she is one of those who are blind because they won't see. I knew from the first how it would be. She promised and vowed

not to touch a drop of liquor while she was down here, and I took every possible precaution ; but, of course, she has found some means of breaking her word—they always do. And I can tell you that Paulina, when she has one of her drinking fits on, is about as good a candidate for a strait-waistcoat as you'll meet with out of Bedlam. It doesn't make her drunk—I wish to heaven it did !—it simply maddens her.”

I said I was very sorry to hear this.

“Are you ?” returned Harry, with a harsh laugh. “Well, perhaps you may be ; for you are—if you will excuse my saying so—quite the greatest fool I have met in the course of a varied experience. Now don't get angry. If I could begin again, I would much rather be a fool of your description than a—shall we say an experienced person ?—of mine. But I am what I am, and there's an end of it. Last night I drank too much wine, and no doubt I said some unpleasant things. I lost my nerve, in fact. In former years I used to drink hard, and though I have given that habit up, the consequences of it have not given me up. I am frightened to death of my father—I always was. I dare say you see

nothing very alarming in the fact of being treated with silent contempt; but then your nerves are stronger than mine, and besides, I have lived all these weeks with the perpetual dread of one of Paulina's outbreaks hanging over me. Now that it has come, I declare I feel a weight off my mind. Well, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. To-morrow, I take it, we shall receive our marching orders, and you and Lady Constance will be made happy. In all sincerity I can say that I shall be thankful to be out of this. But for the boy, I should never have troubled any of you."

"I think you are jumping to conclusions rather too hastily," I said, feeling sorry for the unfortunate fellow in spite of myself. "I must confess that the experiment of your living with my uncle seems to me to have failed; but, perhaps, some other arrangement might be made, so that neither you nor Jimmy should be permanently cut adrift. The principal thing just now is to keep Paulina quiet."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "That is more easily said than done. I tell you plainly it's beyond me. She's not likely to kick up a row

before she reaches home ; but when once she's there, she'll go to the brandy-bottle like a fly to a jar of honey, and no power on earth will stop her. You don't know what I have been through with that woman. It wouldn't surprise me in the least if she were to burn the house down to-night."

This was indeed delightful. "What on earth are we to do?" I ejaculated.

"Oh, nothing," answered Harry placidly ; "there's nothing to be done. I'll prevent her from coming down to dinner to-night, if I can ; but I don't know that I shall achieve it."

"But, hang it all !" I exclaimed, somewhat provoked by his apathy, "surely you can keep her from drinking any more."

"Indeed, I cannot. If I could get hold of the bottle, I should confiscate it ; but she'll take very good care I don't do that. It will be concealed in one of her boxes, or poked up the chimney, or something. Besides, to tell you the truth, I don't much care about irritating her in her present state of mind. She is in a towering rage ; and, upon my word, I don't wonder at it. You must admit that she has had a good deal of provocation this afternoon."

"No doubt," I answered; "still we mustn't be burnt alive. I wonder whether it would do any good if I spoke to her."

"You tried that just now," observed Harry, with a faint smile, "and it was not exactly a success. You are most welcome to try again; only I think I may say that if I can't manage her, you can't. I tell you I will keep her in her own room for to-night, if I can. To-morrow, most probably, we shall put out to sea again; and then you will all sing *Te Deum*."

I said nothing, feeling quite unable to contradict him; and, after a pause he added, "What a triumph it will be for you all! Everybody will be forced to admit that you have shown the noblest unselfishness, and you will be rewarded by the cordial approval of your own consciences into the bargain. As for me, I also shall have my little consolation; for I shall always be able to tell Paulina now that she has been the ruin of me."

Then, as I still remained silent, he fell to whistling softly, and the rest of our walk was accomplished without further exchange of words.



CHAPTER X.

THE CATASTROPHE COMES.

As I was on my way upstairs to dress for dinner, I was intercepted by Cooper, who addressed me with that disquieting phrase, familiar to most people, "If you please, sir, could I speak to you a moment?" I guessed at once what it was that he had to say, and, as soon as I had gone down to the dining-room with him, and he had shut the door with an air of tragic mystery, he justified my forebodings.

"I hope you'll excuse my mentioning it, sir; but are we to supply Mrs. Le Marchant with brandy in her bedroom?"

"Has Mr. Harry given any orders upon the subject?" I inquired; for I was unwilling to make damaging admissions, if they could be avoided.

"No direct orders, sir; but about a week ago brandy was asked for, and Mr. Harry sent the

bottle down again immediate. So just now, when it was wanted again, Mrs. Peters she thought she had better take it up herself."

Here Cooper came to a full stop, cleared his voice, stood on one leg, and looked discreetly embarrassed.

"Well," I said; "Peters took up the brandy and what then?"

"Well, sir, Mrs. Peters poured out half a wine-glass and was leaving the room, taking the bottle with her, you understand, sir; but Mrs. Le Marchant she says, 'Put down that bottle d'reckly!'"

"Yes; go on," said I; for Cooper had once more paused in his narrative.

"Well, sir, Mrs. Peters felt it her dooty for to remonstrate; and then Mrs. Harry she turns and flies out at her hawful, and frightens her so she comes running down to the housekeeper's room and has a bad turn of palpitations. She tells me she never hear such language."

Blended with Cooper's assumption of respectful concern there was a perceptible leaven of curiosity, which I determined not to gratify. I observed that Peters, though doubtless animated

by the best intentions, seemed to have been guilty of an impertinence which any lady would have resented, and added that I believed Mrs. Le Marchant was not feeling very well. "Did Peters—ahem!—leave the bottle behind her?" I inquired, rather marring the effect of my rebuke by this injudicious question.

"I am sorry to say that she did, sir," replied Cooper. "I ask her how she come to be so foolish; but she said that she was that upset she didn't know whether she was standing on her head or on her heels."

I could but trust that Paulina might not experience the same sensation before the evening was over. "Very well, Cooper," I said; "that will do. It's—it's all right."

"I hope I have not done wrong in mentioning of it to you, sir."

"Not at all; but you needn't mention it to any one else, you know."

Cooper replied in an injured tone that he should not dream of doing so; and I went upstairs with such confidence in his assurances as I could muster, but with a dreadful conviction that the storm was about to burst.

On entering the drawing-room a quarter of an hour later, I found my uncle, Mrs. Farquhar, and the General conversing together upon public affairs with a studied politeness and mutual deference which convinced me that they, too, were alive to the perils of the situation; and an unmistakable expression of relief appeared upon the countenances of all three of them when Harry came in with the announcement that his wife had a bad headache which would prevent her from joining us at dinner. This, so far as it went, was good news; but I felt that we were not out of the wood yet. I took Harry aside, and hastily informed him of what I had heard from Cooper; whereat he whistled, and, after hesitating for a moment, left the room. When he reappeared, it was with a quiet smile upon his face.

"The deed is done," he took occasion to whisper to me. "I got her to turn her back for an instant, collared the decanter, and bolted, locking the door on the outside. She'll screech and kick like mad when she finds herself a prisoner; but mercifully nobody can hear her at this distance, and she hasn't had enough liquor

to make her desperate. Very likely she may sober down now."

One could only hope so ; but a vision of Paulina thundering with feet and fists upon the panels of her door remained with me throughout dinner, and caused me extreme discomfort.

For the rest we got on more harmoniously than we had done the night before. Mrs. Farquhar showed a conciliatory disposition ; Harry was quiet and unobtrusive ; and the General, who looked, and no doubt was, very well pleased with the turn matters had taken, enlivened us by choice samples of autobiography. As for my uncle, he spoke little until Jimmy came in to dessert, and sat down beside him, when he roused himself from his abstraction.

And then, while we were lulled thus into a false security, the thunderbolt fell. The door facing me was opened slowly from without ; Paulina, wrapped in a white dressing-gown, strode in like the ghost of Banquo, and advancing with deliberate steps to her husband's side, stood and glared down upon him.

"So," said she, "you'll lock me into my room, will you ? You'll keep me without food nor

drink for fear of me telling too much, will you? Ah, you're a clever one! But next time you try that little game on, don't leave the key in the lock. Why, you silly fool, what had I to do but to ring the bell? I did ring the bell—and here I am, you see," she added, nodding at him.

Perhaps, like many other nervous people, Harry recovered his *sang froid* in moments of emergency; or perhaps it was the calmness of despair that he had arrived at. "It was an unlucky oversight," he said, "and I owe every one an apology. I ought, of course, to have put the key in my pocket; but one can't think of everything. I suppose it would be quite useless for me to suggest, Paulina, that we should go upstairs and fight it out in private; yet I will request you to bear in mind that I strongly recommend that course, because, if you don't adopt it, you will repent bitterly as soon as you come to your senses, you know."

Paulina snorted. "Much obliged to you; but I won't go upstairs yet—not just yet. I've something to say before I go. And I've got all my senses about me; you took good care of that. Oh, you *are* a mean toad!" she exclaimed

suddenly, the memory of her wrongs coming upon her, I suppose, with irresistible force. "I'll teach you to play me such tricks!"

"I was cruel only to be kind," said Harry, who positively seemed to be rather enjoying the scene.

I myself was too horrorstruck to take much notice of the fact that Cooper and his subordinates were looking on with open eyes and mouths; but my uncle had kept his presence of mind. "You can go now, Cooper," he said; "and take Master Jimmy with you. Jimmy, my boy, run away and tell Mrs. Peters to give you some dessert."

Jimmy did not wait to be told a second time. He slipped off his chair and made for the door with great rapidity, followed by the reluctant Cooper. Doubtless he had seen more than one outbreak of hostilities between his father and mother, and was aware that in the sequel the rights of neutrals were apt to be disregarded.

When he was gone, Paulina resumed her denunciation. "Now, you know what I am. I've put up with a deal from you, and I've done a deal for you—and got more kicks than halfpence for my pains too! But when I say I'll

pay you out, you know I'll do it; and I'm going to tell your good friends here a thing or two that'll make them think rather different of you to what they have done—that's what I'm going to do!" At this juncture the General jumped up with great alacrity and offered Paulina a chair. "Pray sit down," said he politely; "we are all attention."

"Thank you, old gentleman," answered Paulina; "but I'd as soon stand. I ain't going to be here long."

It was now Mrs. Farquhar's turn to intervene. She rose, and advanced with trembling outstretched hands, saying, "My dear, my dear, don't speak so! Come up with me and lie down upon your bed. You're just overwrought."

"Get away, will you!" returned the ungrateful Paulina, with a sweeping backhander. "I've had enough of you and your wheedling ways. I tell you my blood's up, and you'd best keep out of reach of my arm."

Mrs. Farquhar retreated to her chair and began to cry feebly. My uncle, with his elbow on the table and his chin supported by the palm of his hand, was gazing at his son and daughter-in-law

with a certain grave curiosity. The General had poured himself out a glass of claret, and was sipping it meditatively, while he tried, without much success, to compose his features into an expression of fitting solemnity.

"Now, listen all of you," Paulina began, speaking with a quick, broken utterance; "and you, Charley, pay attention to this, because it concerns you. I suppose, when this precious fellow turned up in Germany, you thought it was an accident. No such thing! He went out there on purpose to meet you, and see if he couldn't get you into trouble with your uncle some way, so as to step into your shoes."

"I am unwilling to interrupt," put in Harry blandly, "but I feel bound to say that that is utterly untrue."

Paulina disdained to notice him. "He didn't have much difficulty about it neither. As soon as he found out that you was carrying on with that Lady What's-her-name, he begun to see his way. It was easy enough to flatter you up and lead you on, and it didn't need a conjuror to guess that your uncle might threaten to cut you off with a shilling sooner than you should marry

a woman who'd ruin you in a couple of years. You ask your uncle whether he didn't get warnings of what was going on about that time from some kind friend."

"Anonymous letters," said my uncle, "are always doubtful weapons to use. They are especially so when the source from which they come is obvious."

"I never wrote any," returned Harry sullenly.

"No; that you didn't," Paulina went on. "You're telling the truth there, for once, because you made me write 'em for you. Oh, you're artful, you are? You didn't think you was going to gain much by them letters. No! your game was to get a will made with your name in it—just as a matter of form, and by way of stopping the marriage. Your game was to make your father cut up rough with Charley, and swear that he'd leave the estate away from him, if ever that marriage took place. Your game was to frighten the old woman there by telling her the property was in danger, and to work it all through her. And when you'd told lies enough to get Charley to marry on the sly, you didn't mean that that will should be burnt. You knew the

sort of man your father was, didn't you? Recollect what you told me about him one day? Says you, 'He's such a pig-headed old devil that, if he'd given his word to eat his hat unless he was obeyed, he'd sit down and eat it as soon as ever the time came due.' Those was your very words; deny 'em if you can!"

"If you have done," said Harry, "you may as well go back to your room. No one is likely to believe your preposterous story, and no one, I am afraid, can doubt that you are under the influence of liquor."

"Maybe I am," returned Paulina. "Maybe I shouldn't have plucked up the spirit to stand here and say what I have without I'd had a glass or two of brandy. But I've got my senses for all that, and I've told the truth too. And if I do drink," she went on, with a sudden change of tone; "if I'm a drunkard—as I am, God forgive me!—whose fault is it? Who taught me to drink? Who drove me to it? Who made my life so miserable that I should have gone and drowned myself times out of mind if I hadn't known of a way to forget it all? Ah!" she exclaimed, turning away from her husband, and

spreading out her hands with something of pathetic eloquence, "I'd have been an honest woman, if he'd have let me. I tried to keep straight, and to keep him straight; I loved him better than my own soul; but he soon tired of me. All he wanted me for was to do his dirty work. He taught me to lie and cheat, and—and—then I lost heart and took to my bottle. After all, it's the best friend I've found in this wretched world. If he had gone on caring for me—— She broke off with a short sob, and then resumed defiantly—"But it's too late now, and I don't care! Drink and forget it—that's my motto."

Mrs. Farquhar came out from behind her pocket-handkerchief to say solemnly, "It is never too late to repent. Pray that your sin may be forgiven you, and——"

"Pooh!" interrupted Paulina contemptuously, "don't *you* preach! Why, you're committing miserable little sins every hour of the day, and think yourself a saint all the time! Come! I'm honester than you are, anyway. Do you think I haven't prayed on my bended knees to be delivered from this curse?—ah! and read my Bible morning and evening too. Much you know about

temptation ! You haven't so much as found out what it is. Why ? Because you never tried to fight it. Harry, there, he don't believe in God nor Devil ; but I do ; and I say the Devil's got a firm hold of us both."

"This is dreadful !" moaned Mrs. Farquhar.

Paulina burst out laughing. "Well," she said, "I've paid you out now, Harry, like I told you I would. I don't suppose they'll let you stop on here after this ; and I believe you are better out of it. Charley, you've been a good friend to us, and I'm sorry I had to deceive you that day at Richmond ; but it hasn't made much odds, has it ? Good-bye, everybody ; don't break your hearts when I'm gone." And, with a mocking curtsy, Paulina retired.

The door closed behind her, and for a short space none of us spoke. I don't know how the others were feeling ; but my own sensation was one of relief, not unmingled with surprise. The scene had been painful enough—half tragedy, half farce, like nearly all the saddest things in life—but it had passed off with more decorum than I had dared to hope for. We had at least been spared a downright brawl, and if poor

Paulina had been—as she had declared herself to be—under the influence of liquor, she had not been sufficiently so as to justify the picture of her in that state drawn by her husband. Of her revelations I did not, at that first moment, think much, being only too thankful that she had confined her onslaught to words.

After a time, Mrs. Farquhar, murmuring something inaudible, hurried out of the room. Then my uncle got up, and, bending over the General's chair, whispered a few words to him : upon which they, too, silently withdrew. Harry and I were thus left in sole possession of the field, and it became necessary that one or other of us should speak. He it was who broke the silence presently, in a steady, though somewhat hoarse voice.

“I suppose you believe that cock-and-bull story.”

I glanced across the table at him ; but his lowered eyes refused to meet mine. His face, colourless as usual, betrayed no emotion ; only the hand with which he was stroking his moustache trembled slightly.

“Yes,” I answered ; “I believe it.”

"Nevertheless," remarked Harry, "the evidence of a tipsy woman ought not to be considered conclusive, and the story in itself seems rather far-fetched. Taking it for granted that I wished to stand in your shoes, you are asked to believe that, instead of profiting by your own readiness to help me, I fell back upon a very dubious sort of plot, which might have been discovered at any moment, and was sure to be discovered in the long run. The thing does not sound probable."

"I don't know that it matters much whether it is probable or improbable," I said. "The question is whether it occurred."

"Apparently there is no question about that in your mind. Well; you are quite right. I have lost the game, and I don't mind your seeing my hand. I did fully intend to do all that Paulina said. I thought that Lady Constance, who is fearfully hard up, and who, I believe, has a real weakness for you, might be induced to marry you under the rose, if I could persuade her that my father would certainly provide you with a sufficient income as soon as the marriage was an accomplished fact. I thought,

too, that he would do a great deal to prevent that marriage, and that a will naming me as his heir would strike him in the light of a telling move. His obstinacy would probably prevent him from destroying it when once it was made. It was chance-work, of course; but it seemed just worth while to make the attempt—especially as I knew that you had strengthened your position by your ridiculous efforts to gain a pardon for me. As it happened, you know, I was not called upon to go on with the thing; but I still think that it might have succeeded.”

The cool impudence of the man fairly astounded me, and deprived me, for the moment, of the use of my tongue.

“Do you mean me to understand,” I exclaimed indignantly at last, “that all your protestations of gratitude and affection, and I don’t know what else, were so many lies? Your preferring trickery to plain dealing I don’t so much wonder at, since it seems that you have an invincible love for that sort of thing; but I can’t for the life of me see why you should have made all that pretence of friendship.”

“Well, if I hadn’t, I should have had no

opportunity of getting you and Lady Constance married, you know," answered Harry, with perfect composure.

I was half inclined to walk round the table and give him the thrashing he deserved; but I perceived that, under all the circumstances, such a course was scarcely practicable; so I contented myself with saying: "You are far and away the greatest scoundrel I ever saw or heard of."

Harry laughed a little. "Quite so," he said. "And afterwards? I told you, when we first met, that I was a scoundrel. By the way, what Paulina said about my going to Germany on purpose to look you up was nonsense. It is true that I knew you were at Franzenshöhe, and, having to go there upon business of my own, I thought it might be as well to make your acquaintance, with a view to getting a rather larger allowance out of my father, if it could be managed. I had no idea of supplanting you at that time. Come, Charley," he added, in a slightly altered tone, "I am not altogether as black, nor as good an actor, as I have made myself out. I did feel grateful to you for taking me up; I was even grateful to you for asking

my father to throw you over and put me in your place;—though, between ourselves, that was rather a cheap piece of generosity; for you can't have been quite so simple as to suppose that he would take you at your word. Still I give you credit for a certain degree of sincerity. And from the first I always had, and I have still, a real liking for you."

"And yet," I remarked, "you would have married me to Lady Constance to serve your own ends, although you knew you would be condemning us to what you, at all events, would consider a life of poverty and misery."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I assure you I deplored the necessity," answered he.

What was one to say to such a man as this? His exaggerated cynicism might perhaps be the expression of a remnant of self-respect; but it certainly was not calculated to arouse pity or sympathy. Reproaches would be out of place; forgiveness was hardly within the compass of my powers. I could only wish that he would see the propriety of bringing our interview to a close.

"I wonder what the General is about!" I sighed, after a long silence.

"Dear me! don't you know?" said Harry. "He is closeted with my father somewhere, holding a council of war and urging the expediency of prompt and vigorous action. He will come in here presently, you'll see, to tell me that the up-express leaves at 11.15 to-morrow morning. I only trust he won't add that my allowance is to be reduced; but I have my fears."

Whatever the General's errand might prove to be, I wished he would make haste about acquitting himself of it; but I wished in vain. Harry and I sat looking at one another until at last we were obliged in self-defence to begin exchanging desultory remarks. It was past ten o'clock when the General came in with a grave and rather perturbed face.

"My brother has sent me to make a proposition to you," he said to Harry. "I don't approve of it myself; but I can't get him to see the matter as I do, and I am to lay his suggestion before you. I suppose you will be prepared to hear that he has given up all idea of leaving Thirlby to you."

Harry nodded.

"And also that he thinks it would be for

everybody's comfort that you should leave as soon as possible."

"Certainly," answered Harry. "It only remains for us to take ourselves off the first thing in the morning, and never be heard of again."

"I should say so," agreed the General. "To my mind, that would be beyond all comparison the most satisfactory wind-up of the business. But Bernard, unfortunately, holds a rather different opinion. He doesn't consider himself justified in visiting the sins of the father upon the child; therefore he proposes, with your consent, to adopt the child; but only upon the distinct understanding that you resign all rights, present and future, over him, and that he becomes, as it were, my brother's son instead of yours."

"And suppose I decline this offer?" said Harry.

"Well; if you decline," answered the General, brightening visibly, "the property goes to Charley; and, though the boy might come down here upon a visit every now and then, he would inherit nothing at my brother's death beyond the reversion of the sum which you have to expect.

This appears to me to be in every way the most proper and suitable arrangement."

"Ah!" said Harry; "but you see, I don't think I shall decline. If I agree to this, may I ask whether Jimmy would be allowed to come and see me, and if so, how often in the year?"

"He would not be allowed to see you at all," replied the General curtly. "In fact, from the moment that you signed the agreement, you and his mother would cease to exist, so far as he was concerned."

Harry flushed slightly. "Hard terms!—devilish hard terms!" he muttered.

"I dare say. I am not called upon to give an opinion as to that. You must judge for yourself whether you are entitled to expect easy terms, and also whether it would be for your son's advantage or not to be removed from his parents. There's the offer—you can take it or leave it."

Harry pushed back his chair, sprang to his feet, and began pacing up and down the room with quick, irregular steps. Presently he paused beside the table, his face convulsed by a curious smile. "It's a refined revenge!" said he.

"Not at all," returned the General; "it's an attempt to do justice, which you are not bound to take advantage of. Though I imagine that you will," he added, with a sigh.

"Damn it all, sir!" broke out Harry fiercely, "do you suppose that, because I am this, that, and t'other, I have ceased to be a human being? Does a man become blind when he loses his hearing or deaf when he loses his sight?"

"All this is quite beside the mark," answered the General coldly, though he looked a little shamefaced, I thought. "It was my brother's wish that I should put the two alternatives before you, and I have done so. All I have to add is that there can be no compromise."

"Then tell him that I accept his infernal offer!" cried Harry. "He knows, and so do you, that I can't refuse. The boy is all I have to care for in the world, and I care for him enough to let him go. His mother will be glad to get rid of him, and he'll soon forget us both, I dare say. I am sorry for Charley, who is left out in the cold; but I am a great deal more sorry for myself. However, there's not much good in talking. Go and tell him that I accept."

The General bowed. "I have drawn up a draft-agreement for your signature," he said. "Perhaps you will come with me into the study and put your name to it. If a more formal document is required the lawyers will see to that in a day or two; though I doubt whether any legal contract could be made in such a matter."

"Thank you, I'll sign here," answered Harry. "I don't want to see my father any more as long as I live."

The General bowed again. "There is no necessity for your meeting that I am aware of," he said. "I will go and fetch the paper."

"I wish to God I had never come near this cursed place!" exclaimed Harry, as soon as he was gone. "You may say that it serves me right, and perhaps it does; but that's cold comfort."

It was so obviously to my interest that he should not sign that I hesitated to influence him in a contrary sense, yet I thought I might point out to him that he was acting rather precipitately. "Ought you not to consult your wife before you make up your mind?" I asked.

"Paulina won't care a snap," he replied; "you know that well enough. As for me, I shouldn't change my mind if I had a year to think things over in. All that I have done has been for Jimmy's sake, not for my own. I didn't want to be Squire of Thirlby—in fact, if I had got the place, I should never have lived here. But I did want him to have it; and, of course, it is a thousand times better for him to be taken away from us. A drunken mother isn't a very edifying spectacle for a boy; nor am I exactly a model father, perhaps. I'll be shot if I'm not a more natural one than my own father, though!" he added.

The General came back, bearing a half sheet of foolscap and a pen, which he handed to Harry. "I am to tell you," said he, "that you can take a couple of days for consideration, if you choose."

Harry seized the pen, and scrawled his name at the foot of the agreement, without deigning to reply. Then he tossed the paper over to the General, saying, "There! when you give that to my father, you may tell him that he can draw comparisons between me and himself at his

leisure. We have both of us discarded an only son ; but he kicked his out of doors because he hated him, whereas I have renounced mine because I love him. Sounds odd, doesn't it ? considering what a very good and virtuous man he is, and what an unmitigated ruffian I am. Perhaps his books of philosophy may help him to solve the problem."

The General, who had assumed a demeanour of cold inflexibility, only replied, "I am not here to undertake my brother's defence ; but I think you are forgetting that you gave him very good reasons for drumming you out in the first instance, and that, since you have been here this time, you have lost no opportunity of convincing him that he was right."

"Right ? oh, to be sure he was right," returned Harry, with a laugh. "He has always been right ; and that, I suppose, is why he finds it difficult to make the smallest allowance for people who are occasionally wrong. He is quite right, for instance, in removing an innocent child from the contagion of bad example. And yet, such is my ingratitude and perversity that, so far from admiring him for this last perform-

ance of his, I consider it to be, upon the whole, about the most cold-blooded piece of malignity I ever heard of."

And, without bidding either of us good-night, Harry turned on his heel, and left the room.

"This is rough on you, Charley," remarked the General ruefully.

"Oh, I don't think so," said I; "but it has rather taken my breath away, I confess. Do you think I might go in and see my uncle?"

"Well, not to-night, if you don't mind. He said he should like to talk to you to-morrow. He is a good bit shaken, I expect; though you wouldn't suppose it from his manner. Between you and me, Charley," the General went on confidentially, "Bernard is a most extraordinary fellow. Adopting the boy was all very well. I am sorry he should have thought it his duty to do so; still I am not surprised. But forbidding him ever to see his parents again—by George, you know, it's a strongish measure!"

I certainly thought it was.

"Well, well," said the General, picking up the paper from the table where Harry had flung

it down, and moving towards the door, "I'm sorry for that poor devil, little as I like him. And, what's more, I believe Bernard is sorry for him too. But the odd thing about Bernard is that his feelings don't seem to influence him in the smallest degree, one way or the other. I call that a little bit unnatural, you know."





CHAPTER XI.

MY UNCLE WISHES ME GOOD LUCK.

ALL my life I have been, in a humble sort of way, an observer of human character, and have taken such opportunities as have come to me of noticing its various developments under various conditions ; but I have never been carried far enough by love of this kind of study to enjoy the spectacle of misery or disgrace. When, therefore, I woke up on the morning that was to witness the expulsion of Harry and Paulina from Thirlby, I became seized with a longing to run away so irresistible that I stole down the backstairs, requisitioned some bread and cheese which I found in the kitchen, and was half-way across the park, with my rod and fishing-basket, before I had time to reason with myself as to the propriety of such a line of conduct.

I had not proceeded far in the course of my

flight when I encountered Bunce, who expressed great surprise at seeing me about so early, but who appeared satisfied with my allegation that I wanted to catch a pike as big as the Rector's. He was easily persuaded to get the boat ready, to lay in a modest stock of provisions, and to accompany me to the utmost extremity of the Broad, where, if I didn't catch anything, I should at least, I thought, be safe from being myself caught.

"This seems quite like old times, doesn't it, Bunce?" I said, as he shook out the sail, while I took the tiller. And he replied, "It do, sir—it do. The times is gettin' a deal too noo for me. I don't hold with noo times;—no, nor with noo people neither!"

I spent what, under any other circumstances, would have been a very pleasant morning, and did not make for home again until after two o'clock; thus avoiding luncheon, as well as the distressing scene which I felt sure must have preceded that meal. As I was crossing the park, the General, walking briskly and swinging his stick, overtook me.

"Well, Charley," said he somewhat anxiously,

"is it all over? Our friends off and away, eh?"

"That is the very question," I answered, "that I was going to put to you. I haven't seen a soul, except Bunce, to-day. The truth is that I funk'd it, and bolted before breakfast."

"There are two of us, then," observed the General, laughing. "While I was dressing I thought to myself that my presence wouldn't be required, and I didn't much want to see that unfortunate chap say good-bye to his son, you know; so I just walked over to have a chat with Dennison, and I've been at the Rectory ever since. I think it was rather shabby of you to slink away like that, though, Charley; I expected to hear from you how it all went off."

"And I expected to hear the same thing from you," retorted I; "so it's even."

I suppose we were both rather ashamed of ourselves; for we continued to exchange reproaches until we reached the house, where Mrs. Farquhar gave us a tearful and confused account of what had occurred. It seemed that Harry had behaved very well, but that Paulina, whose wrath of the previous evening had completely

evaporated, had made a dreadful disturbance, accusing herself of having ruined her husband, offering to go away without him, and displaying a lamentable want of reticence before the servants. It had been thought better not to let Jimmy know that he would see his parents no more, and he had submitted to the parting with the utmost philosophy.

"It's an awful responsibility to have taken," concluded Mrs. Farquhar, sobbing, "and I can but pray that Bernard may not be called upon to give an account of it at the Last Day. I wash my hands of it—I've done *my* best;—but eh! he's a headstrong man!"

There was some comfort in hearing Mrs. Farquhar make an accusation which she assuredly would not have phrased in that way a few days before. Her manner, even more than her words, showed she had at last discovered my uncle to be a somewhat different person from what she had hitherto imagined, and there seemed ground for hope that she might entertain a salutary awe of him for the future. I left her appealing to the General to say whether events like these were not calculated to bring her grey hairs down with

sorrow to the grave, and betook myself to the study, which my uncle's voice, in answer to my knock, at once bade me enter.

His face lighted up when he saw me. "Ah, Charley," he said, "I have been waiting a long time for you. Come and sit down here; I owe you an explanation."

I took a chair beside him, as he asked me, but assured him that he owed me nothing.

"Yet," he said, with a smile, "I don't think you would be satisfied if I kept silence."

"Not if you kept silence about it all," I confessed; "but I thought you meant that something ought to be said about my not inheriting the property."

"Well; so I do. Something must be said about that, undoubtedly."

"Not very much, then. We agreed upon that point long ago; and I am sure you have done the right thing in adopting Jimmy. Very likely you have done the right thing all through; but I can't help feeling a little uneasy about it, somehow."

"In what sense?"

"Only that one doesn't like to think of a

father and child being separated for ever. Upon the face of it, it does seem rather cruel."

"The necessity no doubt is cruel," answered my uncle gravely; "but it does not appear to me that I, as the instrument of necessity, am any more cruel than the surgeon who cuts off a diseased limb. Of course it would have been easier and pleasanter not to perform the operation. I don't forget that, such as Harry is, I am in a great measure responsible for him. If I had only myself to think about, I should have no business to drive him away because he is what he is, or because he has a wife who drinks. But I am not to make fresh mistakes by way of atoning for old ones which can never be repaired now. For the boy's own sake, as well as for the sake of our name and of those who bore it before me, I am bound to do all in my power to bring him up as a gentleman and a man of honour; and I ask you—Would the example of his father and mother be likely to do him good?"

"Do you think it would really do him so very much harm?" I said, for my uncle's deliberate utterances had by no means convinced me.

"I don't feel the smallest doubt about it," he

answered ; "you can't touch pitch and escape defilement. Very likely, if I were to allow the boy to go to his parents for a week or two every now and then, they would be upon their good behaviour before him ; they would try to avoid scandals and to live decently, or seem to live decently, while he was with them. But one of them, at least, could never change his nature ; and I don't see how it would be possible for a growing lad to associate with him and not be the worse for it. Of course," he added, after a pause, "there are hosts of obvious objections to the plan that I have decided upon ; but I have come to the conclusion that there would be worse objections to any other plan that could have been devised."

"What do you mean to say to Jimmy himself about it ?" I inquired.

"That is a great difficulty, I allow. Happily, children have short memories and are soon consoled. My hope is that he will like his new life well enough to accept it without many questions. As he grows older he will naturally wish for more information, and then he will have to be told the truth."

"Quite so; and then—unless he grows up very unlike other mortals—he will take his father's part."

"I dare say he may. When he is grown up, there will be no objection to his meeting his father; only, as I shall take care that he will be able to do little or nothing for his father, in a pecuniary sense, either before or after my death, I think we may fairly doubt whether his advances will be responded to."

"What an awfully bad opinion you have of Harry!" I exclaimed.

"Have you a good opinion of him?"

"No; but let us give the devil his due. I think he is fond of Jimmy. He has shown it by giving the boy up; because, as you say, he can never get any personal profit out of the arrangement."

My uncle looked troubled, and sighed. "That is true," he answered. "It is a bad business. All I can say is that compromises would only have turned it into a worse one. And, although I don't want to evade the responsibility of having suggested the present solution, I may remind you that Harry agreed to it of his own

free will. Had he chosen otherwise, I should have been better pleased. We might then have had Jimmy down here as much as possible, and among us, I think, we might have made something of him. Only, in that case, I should not have ventured to run the risk of making him my heir."

This scrupulousness seemed to me a trifle overstrained, but I said nothing; and my uncle went on:

"I am very sorry, too, for your sake, that matters should have fallen out as they have done. You won't blame me, I know; but it can't be denied that Fortune has used you hardly."

"It's all in the day's work," said I. "Don't you bother yourself about me. I shall be all right."

After this there was a rather long pause, during which my uncle fidgeted with the books and papers that were lying on the table before him. I knew what he was thinking about, and that he was waiting for me to open the subject which was uppermost in both our minds; but I was extremely reluctant to say the first word, and it was only when I saw that he would not speak at all, unless I did, that I began:

"Was what Paulina said last night true—that Harry wrote to you about me and Lady Constance Milner?"

"Oh, yes," answered my uncle. "He wrote anonymously to begin with, and afterwards he was careful that full reports of your proceedings should reach me through my mother. The whole thing was sufficiently silly and contemptible, and I need hardly say that I saw through it from the first. The result of it, however," he added smiling, "is that I could give a tolerably accurate account of your relations with this lady from the time that George Warren first wrote to me about her up to a recent date."

"Why have you never said anything to me?" I asked.

"I thought perhaps you would say something to me," answered my uncle.

I confessed that I had been ashamed to speak. I said, "I knew what you must think of me. I told you, before I went abroad, that I should never change, and then, almost immediately, I did change. One doesn't like to acknowledge one's self a weather-cock."

"I fancy that most men would have to make

that acknowledgment if we lived in a Palace of Truth," observed my uncle. "If there had been an engagement between you and Miss Maud the case would have been altogether different; but as there was none, I don't see that you have any very serious sin to reproach yourself with. What I should like to know, if you don't object to telling me, is whether you have chosen finally now."

"I am not sure," I answered, emboldened into saying aloud what I had hitherto hardly ventured to say to myself. "When I am away from her, I sometimes think that it has been all a mistake; but as soon as I see her again I feel as if I had no will of my own and must do whatever she tells me. It seems like awful bosh, I know," I continued shamefacedly; "but I can't help thinking that she has some way of mesmerising me."

"That sounds very uncomfortable," remarked my uncle. "Do you suppose that she has any—affection for you, or is she only amusing herself with these mesmeric performances?"

I replied that I hadn't the slightest idea. I did not believe that she was merely amusing

herself; but, on the other hand, I could not say that I had any reason to suspect her of being in love with me. "However, it all signifies very little now," I concluded; "because she will certainly decline to marry me when she hears that I am not to have Thirlby."

"H'm!—if you are quite sure of that, Charley, I should strongly recommend you not to see her again," said my uncle. "From what you tell me, I doubt whether either of you will be broken-hearted."

I explained that this course, however advisable in the abstract, could not be adopted by me, as I had already promised to meet Lady Constance shortly in Yorkshire. "It will be our last meeting, most likely," I added sadly.

Then my uncle gave me a good deal of kind and wise counsel, which it is needless to record here. "I can't pretend that I wish to see you married to this lady," he wound up by saying; "I think you are too young, and it does not appear to me that she is very well suited to be a poor man's wife. Nevertheless, if she consents to take you, in spite of your fallen fortunes, I will welcome her gladly, and do what I can to

make Thirlby pleasant to her, so long as she cares to use the house as her home. We have plenty of space, you know, and with the help of the upholsterers, I think we might arrange a set of rooms that would be habitable—at any rate, for a time.”

I thanked him ; but I could not help thinking that Lady Constance would be scarcely more in her element at Thirlby than Paulina had been. It was, at all events, as certain as anything could be that she would never come among us as my wife. I was convinced of that ; and I said so.

“Then why go to Yorkshire to meet her?” my uncle asked.

“Well—I promised, you see,” answered I.
“And besides——”

“I understand,” said he, smiling ; “and I wish you good luck.”

But what my uncle meant by good luck he left as discreetly undefined as the question of which was Pretender and which King in the old toast.



CHAPTER XII.

I MAKE A DISCOVERY.

WHEN I left my uncle's study it was already past four o'clock, and I had not forgotten my appointment to meet Maud at five. I strolled down towards the place agreed upon, wondering what my uncle would think, if he knew whither I was bound, and wondering still more what Maud would say to me. She would, of course, have heard the news from the General, and perhaps she might not now think it necessary to meet me at all. As a foreboding of this possibility crossed my mind, I became aware that I should be very much disappointed if it were fulfilled.

It was one of those dull, soft afternoons which herald the approach of autumn. A thin, unbroken layer of cloud obscured the sun; there was not a breath of wind to stir the leaves of the elms in the Park, and as I drew near the Broad

I saw the great sheet of water lying before me, grey and glassy, with only here and there a circle appearing upon its surface when a fish rose. The tall reeds and osiers upon the margin were motionless and silent. Such very still weather is always a little mournful, and just now it seemed to me that the familiar landscape wore an air of soft regret. I made instinctively for the spot where Maud and I had parted two years before, and which I had never revisited until now, Everything was startlingly unchanged. There was the old punt, rotting away slowly in its old position ; the osiers had not been thinned nor the reeds meddled with ; I could even hear the ducks hard by in the decoy which Bunce and I had constructed together so long ago. And while I stood gazing at the far-away opposite shore, and thinking that I would give ten years of my life to obliterate the last two and start afresh, I heard a rustle behind me, and, turning round, saw the figure that had been wanting to render the resurrection of the dead past complete.

Maud had not mentioned any particular part of the water-side as being the scene of her

evening walks, and this was a spot somewhat difficult to reach at times ; yet I had felt sure that it was here that we should meet ; and now she was standing at my elbow, looking at me with grave, sorrowful eyes.

I couldn't help it—I knew it was wrong—but, as I held her hand, I murmured, “Do you remember ?”

She nodded. “Have you been here since ?” she asked.

“Never. And you ?”

“No ; this is the first time. How unaltered it all is !”

“Yes,” said I sadly ; “nothing is changed except——”

“Except everything,” she interrupted hastily. “Suppose we go somewhere else.”

She turned as she spoke, and, brushing through the reeds and undergrowth, made her way into the thick of the woods, I following her. After a time we came to the fallen trunk of a tree upon which she seated herself, remarking :

“So it is all over and settled ! I had prepared a great many very sensible things to say to you ; but they will have to remain unsaid.

There is nothing to be done now but to make the best of it."

"You don't look pleased," I observed.

"As far as I can make out, nobody is pleased," she returned. "General Le Marchant is not; he says his brother is not; Mrs. Farquhar, it appears, is in the depths of woe; and as for your cousin and his wife, one can imagine what *their* feelings are likely to be. Really I don't know who is pleased—unless you have the perversity to tell me that you are."

"I am a good deal better-pleased than I was yesterday afternoon, anyhow," said I. "I little thought then that we should have taken a final leave of Harry and Paulina within twenty-four hours. And I believe, upon the whole, I am glad that Jimmy is to take up his abode here. He will be a companion for my uncle, and I dare say he won't miss his father very much. One can't wish that he should."

"His father," observed Maud, "appears to have got his deserts; and now that he has been kicked off into space, one may allow one's self to feel a little sorry for him perhaps. Only I wish he had seen fit to take his child with him."

General Le Marchant says they would have been quite comfortably off, and he thinks your uncle was a good deal taken aback when his offer was accepted. However, the thing is done now, and can't be undone."

"I, for one, have no wish to undo it."

"That is nonsense, Charley!" exclaimed Maud, drawing her brows together. "One may bear misfortunes, and put a good face upon them; but I never yet heard of anybody who said he liked them."

I submitted that it was not always so easy to tell what were and what were not misfortunes.

"I can't see much difficulty in the present instance," Maud declared; "and though you won't say that you are disgusted, I haven't the slightest objection to acknowledge that I am. All this long time I have watched Mrs. Farquhar busily building up her plot, bit by bit, dropping little doses of calumny here and there, sighing over you as a reprobate, and letting fall mysterious hints about 'poor dear Bernard' and 'poor dear Harry,' and the obstinacy of the one and the wrongs and repentance of the other; and I have consoled myself by thinking that the

truth would certainly come out one of these fine days. Now the truth has come out at last, and after all the wrong side wins! One can't blame anybody either, which adds to the bitterness of one's disappointment." She ceased for a moment, and then resumed: "My regrets are chiefly mercenary, and if you don't share them, so much the better. But you told me in London that your engagement to Lady Constance Milner would be broken off if you were disinherited, and surely you will allow that to be a misfortune."

While Maud had been speaking, I had been lying on the ground at her feet, and looking up into her beautiful face, which was half turned away from me. I heard what she said, but I paid little attention to it; for, as I lay there listening to her, I was recalling the regretful expression I had seen in her eyes at the moment of our meeting; I was thinking, as I had often thought before, of George Warren's prophetic words, and I was admitting to myself for the first time that they were true. A pale glimmer of sunshine escaped from the clouds, and penetrated through the thick foliage overhead: it seemed to me like a presage of brighter things.

All that had happened in the past two years appeared on a sudden to have had no actual existence. I awoke from my long dream, and knew that in truth I had never ceased to love Maud at all.

From the mingled pleasure and pain of this swift discovery I was roused by the sound of Lady Constance Milner's name, and I said slowly: "I am not engaged to Lady Constance; but if I were, I should think it anything but a misfortune that the engagement would now have to come to an end."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Maud, rather impatiently.

"Exactly what I say," I replied. "I have come to my senses, that's all. One afternoon—it was among the ruins of an old Greek theatre in Sicily—I lost my head, and I thought I had lost my heart too. Ever since then I have been nursing that delusion—it has required a good deal of nursing at times—but at last I am quit of it. I know now that I have never really been in love with Lady Constance."

Maud shifted her position a little so as to face me. "And pray, when did you find this out?" she asked.

"About five minutes ago, I think," answered I.

She either did not understand me or did not choose to do so. She rose from the log upon which she had been seated, stood for an instant, looking away from me, and then——

"You will think differently after you have seen her again, perhaps," she said. "Shall we walk on? I can't stay out late this evening."

We passed through the trees in single file, neither of us speaking for some little time; but at length Maud stopped, and faced about abruptly.

"I wish you wouldn't talk as you have taken to doing lately," she said. "You are not a bit like what you used to be. You seem anxious to make me believe that you don't care a straw about anything."

That was not quite the effect that I had intended to produce; but I only answered, "I don't care very much about having lost Thirlby, I confess; and, after what I said just now, you must see that I can't care very much about the consequences of my having lost it either."

"You had no business to say what you did just now," she returned.

"But if it was true?"

"It *cannot* be true," replied Maud, with a touch of anger.

"But it is," I persisted.

"Then," said she drily, "I don't envy you the duty of telling Lady Constance the truth."

"I don't think I shall be called upon to tell her anything beyond the fact of Jimmy's promotion," I said. "That will be quite conclusive."

"And yet," remarked Maud thoughtfully, "she must care a good deal for you, or she would not have thought of marrying you upon the strength of your expectations. What if she were to say that she was willing to take you as you are?"

"She won't."

"But supposing that she did?"

"Well, in such a case," I replied, "I don't think I could draw back. I don't think I could tell her that I found I had made a mistake. No! I should have to go on with it then, and for ever hold my peace."

"Come!" cried Maud, "I am glad to hear you say that. That is the first satisfactory thing that you have said this afternoon. And do you

know I should not be very much surprised if she did consent to marry you in spite of all your poverty."

"You don't know Lady Constance," I said. "She will never consent to marry a poor man. If she is in one of her softer moods she will perhaps express some regret; but she will certainly send me about my business. And so, you see," I added, "the misfortune you were speaking of may turn out to be no misfortune after all."

Maud walked on without replying. As soon as we had emerged from the wood, and I could step up to her side, I asked her why she should wish me to marry a woman whom I did not love.

"I never said that I wished that," she answered; "I was only glad to hear that you recognised some sort of obligation in the matter. If you change about in the way that you say you do, it is no fault of yours, perhaps—I suppose you can't help it. But I think you ought to understand that everybody is not like that. Now, I must say good-bye; for I promised to go and see one or two poor people before dinner."

Had her words a double meaning? If they had, I could well afford to put up with a rebuke which my conscience told me was not undeserved. Her manner was decidedly colder than it had been at the beginning of our interview; but I was not surprised at that, nor was I discouraged. I watched her out of sight, and then walked homewards with a light heart; for I thought to myself, "Come what may, I have at least found my liberty again."





CHAPTER XIII.

LADY CONSTANCE SPEAKS PLAINLY.

WHEN Jimmy came to a realising sense of the fact that his parents had gone away for good, he very naturally grew uneasy, and put many embarrassing questions, which we had to evade as best we could. He was, however, a great deal too sharp to be put off by prevarication, and I imagine that, finding it impossible to get anything definite or satisfactory out of his relations, he turned his attention towards another quarter, and obtained the desired information in the house-keeper's room. One day he abstained suddenly from his inquiries, and was somewhat silent and pensive during breakfast time; but, as I was riding out with him the same afternoon, he startled me by announcing, in a casual manner, that he intended to live with his father again so soon as he should be grown-up.

"I don't want to go back home now," he added ingenuously, "because it's so *much* jollier in the country; and father can't come here, you know, because grandfather and he don't get on. But Mrs. Peters says I can do what I like when I'm twenty-one; and mother won't be able to whop me then."

The remoteness of the date assigned seemed to dispense with all need for argument. Without expressing any opinion as to the wisdom or otherwise of Jimmy's ulterior designs, I took up the safe ground of recommending him to be a good boy in the meantime, and to submit himself to Tomkinson, the curate, who had agreed to undertake his education until such time as he should be far enough advanced to be sent to school. This he said he would do, merely asking me, as a matter of personal appreciation, whether I did not think Mr. Tomkinson an awful muff. I certainly did think so—indeed, I don't see how anybody could possibly have thought anything else—but I represented to Jimmy in reply, that it is seldom safe to express judgments upon those set in authority over us; to which proposition

he gave a ready assent, his own experience having probably been of a kind to lend confirmation to it.

I should have been glad to imitate Jimmy's promptitude and decision in regulating my own future line of action ; but a little reflection convinced me that I was not altogether so free an agent as I had supposed myself in my first moment of exultation. It was all very well to have succeeded in dispelling an illusion ; but I could not help perceiving that there were complications about my position which would be less easily shaken off. Although Lady Constance might spare me the pains of initiating a rupture, so far as a marriage between her and me was concerned, it was by no means equally certain that she would at once absolve me from the vows of life-long devotion which I had so repeatedly taken upon myself ; and if she did not think fit to do this, an explanation must ensue which I disliked to contemplate. Moreover, I had good reasons for misdoubting myself. She had enslaved me once against my will, and why should she not do the same thing again ?

In due course I received a note from Mrs.

Fitzpatrick, inviting me to join a shooting-party at Wakeworth Castle (which was the name of her husband's place in Yorkshire) on the 14th, and remain until the 16th—a form of invitation which was less common in those days than it has since become, and which impressed me rather disagreeably. It is doubtless a convenience, in some respects, to know when you are expected to go away; but there is a certain lack of the spirit of hospitality about such intimations, and in the present instance it struck me as needlessly emphasising the fact that I had been asked for a special purpose. Mrs. Fitzpatrick, with whom I had little more than a bowing acquaintance, would certainly not have asked me at all unless she had been requested to do so, and her meaning put into plain language, seemed to be, "Come and say what you have to say, and then take yourself off as quickly as possible." I didn't like it; but I comforted myself by thinking that the ordeal would, at any rate, be a short one.

I reached my destination on the day appointed only just in time to dress, and when I went down stairs, I found myself one of a numerous assemblage. The house, which was a big one, was full,

it seemed, and in addition to those who were staying in it, guests from the neighbourhood had been invited to dinner, and were now arriving in large numbers. Among these I presently recognised the familiar form of Mr. Sotheran, who strutted into the room, rubbing his hands complacently, and whose astonishment upon becoming aware of me partook, apparently, of the nature of dismay. Indeed he allowed himself to be so far startled out of his ordinary composure as to ejaculate, "Hullo!—hullo!—" and stand stock-still, with his mouth open, unable to get out another syllable.

I held out my hand, saying, "How do you do?"—upon which he recovered himself, expressed a polite hope that I was quite well, and passed on. Little as Mr. Sotheran and his designs concerned me now, I derived some enjoyment from the disconcerted face of my whilom rival, and it occurred to me that he could not be quite so sure of himself as he had been some months before, since the mere sight of one whose pretensions he had formerly ridiculed could so greatly perturb him.

Lady Constance was the last to enter the

room. She swept in with that ease of movement and air of heartfelt superiority to all about her which caused people to describe her—not untruly—as distinguished-looking. As she progressed down the room she made frequent pauses and, while she was talking to somebody else, extended her left hand to me, without looking at me. To tell the truth, I was just as well pleased that she did not look at me; for I was feeling guilty and uncomfortable, and I knew that those half-closed eyes of hers were as quick to discern facial symptoms as her brain was to interpret them. She passed on, having vouchsafed me nothing more than that back-handed recognition of my presence, and immediately afterwards dinner was announced.

The lady whom I had the honour of escorting to the dining-room was a subacid person of uncertain age, devoid of personal charms, but gifted with conversational powers of a vivacious order. She opened fire upon me at once in the charming style peculiar to spinsters of her class.

“You have come here for the big shoot to-morrow, I suppose; are you a good shot? No?—oh, but you must shoot your very best to-

morrow, or Mr. Fitzpatrick won't ask you again. Do you approve of ladies going out with the guns? Not as a rule?—how rude of you! But as an exception, perhaps? I wonder if there are any exceptional ladies here! Lady Constance Milner, for instance—she is a great friend of yours, is she not? Not such a particular friend? Oh, I was told that she was a very particular friend indeed. You met her abroad, of course; most people do meet her abroad; though I am sure there can't be any truth in the gossip about her owing so much money that she daren't show her face in England."

"Well, considering that she is here at this moment——" I observed.

"Ah, exactly!—that only shows how horridly ill-natured people are; and I don't in the least believe that poor Lord Rossan paid half her debts at the beginning of the season. Now do tell me, is it a fact that she is going to marry Mr. Sotheran? You don't know? Oh, I am sure you do, only you won't trust me; and that is very disagreeable of you, because I never repeat things. I do hope there is no truth in the report; I think it would be such a pity! Not,

of course, that Mr. Sotheran isn't an excellent match ; and he is a decent sort of man, too, in his way. Still, he is not exactly brilliant, you know, and Lady Constance is so very clever and amusing. *I* call her quite handsome myself ; though I don't think I should wear green, if I were she. But mind you don't tell her that I said that."

"I give you my word of honour that I won't say a single thing to her about you," answered I with fervour ; for I thought it was high time to suppress this incarnate libel upon her sex.

The sudden savagery of my onslaught was rewarded by success ; for she turned her angular shoulder towards me and attacked her other neighbour, while I profited by this respite to take notice of the distribution of the company. I had half expected to be placed next to Lady Constance ; but probably the exigencies of precedence had rendered such an arrangement impossible ; and the same cause may have led to the banishment of Mr. Sotheran, who was sitting between two stout ladies, far away from the object of his affections, and was looking rather gloomy over it. The remainder of the faces that

came within my ken were unknown to me; and were not in themselves calculated to excite interest. Is there any form of entertainment so utterly depressing as a large dinner-party in a country house? An afternoon dance may run its close perhaps; but then there is always the possibility of retreat from afternoon parties; whereas, when once you are seated at the festive board in the country, all hope of escape before half-past ten at earliest must be abandoned. There are generally too many people; there is always too much to eat; there is very seldom anything to talk about.

However, I am bound to say that my dreadful spinster was not affected by the latter drawback to enjoyment. She fell upon me again presently with unabated energy, and, after directing some of my most withering shafts of sarcasm at her in vain, I resigned myself to the inevitable, and allowed her to damn her friends with faint praise in peace until the glad moment arrived when she was swept away from my side by the ebbing tide of petticoats.

Hardly had the door closed behind the last of them when Mr. Sotheran rose deliberately, picked

up his napkin and wine-glass, and, walking round the table, seated himself beside me. "You are not, I think, very intimately acquainted with our good host and hostess," he began.

"Not very," I confessed, wondering what was coming next.

"Ah—so I supposed. Now, may I ask whether you are here by Lady Constance Milner's desire?"

"You may ask, of course," I replied, a good deal amused; "but I don't think you ought to be surprised if I decline to answer."

"I am aware," Mr. Sotheran rejoined, "that the question is—er—an unusual one. As, however, we have already had a conversation of somewhat unusual freedom with regard to Lady Constance, I will venture to repeat it. I have reason, if not exactly a right as yet, to feel some curiosity upon this point. You will remember that I told you in London that you had no chance—no chance whatever, and that I myself had a confident expectation of—er—cutting you out, if I may so express myself. Events have proved that I was not too boastful upon that occasion. I may say that Lady Constance has now as good as consented to—to——"

Here Mr. Sotheran's pompous flow of words ran dry, and I helped him out with—"To accept your hand and heart?"

"Well, yes; I believe I may say so. Oddly enough, she refused to give me a final answer before the 16th—that is, the day after to-morrow; and I am naturally anxious to know whether your unlooked-for arrival has any connection with her choice of that date."

"Really, Mr. Sotheran," said I, "I don't see why I should relieve your natural anxiety. The worst of refusing to answer such questions is that a refusal is generally taken for an admission;—which shows that they ought never to be put. You remember what Sir Walter Scott said when he was asked whether he was the author of the *Waverley Novels*—'I am not; but if I were I should say the same thing, because you have no business to ask.' I don't think I can do better than imitate Sir Walter."

For an instant a look came over Mr. Sotheran's wooden countenance which made me feel that I should not care to have him for my master; but he kept his temper well in hand. With the remark that it would be easy for him to address

inquiries elsewhere, he moved to a vacant chair higher up the table, leaving me in some doubt as to whether I had scored or not. If I had been the means of causing him a little uneasiness, it must be owned that his information had done as much for me. It was now clear that Lady Constance had chosen to put me in the painful position of arbiter of her destinies, and as I thought of it all, and of the great difficulty which I knew that I should find in hiding my defection from her, I heartily wished that I had refused Mrs. Fitzpatrick's invitation. After all, a letter would have equally well answered the purpose of letting Lady Constance know that my prospects had melted into nothing. But it was no use thinking of that now, and I went into the drawing-room presently, only hoping that I might find some early opportunity of discharging myself of the task laid upon me.

No such opportunity, however, was afforded to me. Lady Constance was, as usual, the centre of an animated group, from which she did not care to detach herself, in spite of all my imploring glances. No one, to look at her, would have supposed that she had the smallest anxiety upon

her mind ; and yet it was impossible to imagine that she could be anything but anxious. When the strangers, including Mr. Sotheran, had gone away, she withdrew, and I was fain to adjourn to the billiard-room with the other men, and play pool till bed-time.

The next morning I had, of course, to go out shooting ; and if, as I had been assured, my chance of being asked to Wakeworth again depended upon the number of birds that I brought down, that chance was then and there finally extinguished. At any other time I should have been mortified at having made such an exhibition of myself ; but now I was only too thankful to be provided with a plausible pretext for returning to the Castle early in the afternoon. Lady Constance had not appeared with the other ladies and the luncheon, which gave me some hope that I might find her alone on my return.

In this hope I was not disappointed. After searching several vast and empty rooms, I came upon her at last, writing letters in what, from its appearance, I judged to be Mrs. Fitzpatrick's boudoir, and as soon as she saw me she laid down her pen.

"I did not expect you so early," she remarked.

"I couldn't wait any longer," I answered.

"Ever since I came I have been wanting to have a word with you ; but you wouldn't give me any help."

"Perhaps I didn't share all that anxiety," she said calmly. "Well, now that you have unearthed me, what have you to say?"

"Nothing pleasant," replied I, determined to deliver myself of my evil tidings with all possible despatch. "My uncle has now finally decided that his grandson is to have the property. My cousin turned out a failure, and had to be dismissed ; but he agreed to leave the boy at Thirlby to be brought up by my uncle. And so it has been settled in that way. I, of course, shall get nothing, or very little, beyond what I have now."

"You seem," observed Lady Constance, "to have played your cards very unskilfully ; but I am glad to hear that my clever friend Chapman has burnt his fingers. What did he do to merit this second disgrace?"

"Oh, he made himself obnoxious in many ways," I answered ; "and then, one evening, his wife treated us to a scene, in the course of

which she divulged all his plots. It doesn't much matter, does it? Is that what interests you most in this news?"

For I was inconsistent enough to feel a little hurt by her indifference.

"I apologise for my thoughtlessness," Lady Constance said. "You mean, no doubt, that that is not what interests *you* most, and that you would like to be assured of your formal release. You have it, of course; but I may say that you would have had it even if that erratic uncle of yours had disposed of his property in your favour.

I knew at once that I was found out; but I foolishly attempted to put on an air of surprise. "My release?" I repeated.

Lady Constance laughed; and her laugh was not altogether a pleasant one. "Do you really suppose," she asked, "that you are going to march out with the honours of war? Do you think I didn't see, before I had been five minutes in the room last night, that you were ashamed of yourself? And was it so difficult to guess the meaning of that hang-dog look?"

I could say nothing; for I was only too con-

scious of my inability to disguise the truth. I had betrayed myself, and I ought to have known that I should betray myself. It only remained for me now to submit to the chastisement which was my due.

"I don't quarrel with you for having changed your mind," Lady Constance went on; "indeed, I congratulate you. But don't you think that it was just a little bit unworthy of so high-minded a person as yourself to try and get your freedom without asking for it? Do you consider that your plan of leading me to suppose you still a devoted, though unfortunately impoverished, admirer of mine was quite in accordance with the worship of truth which we both profess?"

"How do you know that I had any such plan?" I was stung into retorting.

"Ah! how, indeed? Perhaps that was not your plan. Perhaps you came here to inform me of your engagement to Miss Dennison."

"I came here because you told me to come," said I; "and the first thing I heard of was your engagement to Mr. Sotheran."

"I am not engaged to Mr. Sotheran."

“Nor am I engaged to Miss Dennison.”

“Only going to be. Yes, yes ; you are quite right ; I am going to be engaged to Mr. Sotheran. But that does not exactly make us quits. I told you that I should be obliged to marry Mr. Sotheran under certain circumstances ; but what you told me was that under no circumstances whatever would you marry any one but myself. I am sorry to say things which sound in such wretched taste ; but I think you need a gentle reminder of the facts.”

Up to this point we had both been standing ; but now Lady Constance moved away towards a piano which stood in a corner of the room, and, sitting down before it, began to strike a few random chords. Presently—whether by hazard or intention I can’t say—she broke into the same *nocturne* of Chopin’s which she had played one morning at Franzenshöhe when the snow was falling. As the well-remembered cadences fell upon my ear, the whole scene came back to me. I could see again the bright little room with its masses of flowers, and the logs blazing on the hearth, and the white flakes whirling down outside ; I could recall all that she had said, and

how I had been nearer to being truly in love with her that morning than I had ever been before or since. Yet there was something which I could not recall; and I was half glad, half ashamed to find it irrecoverable. Perhaps it was because I felt this, and was in no fear of losing my head a second time, that I drew near the piano and said :

“Lady Constance, I want to tell you the whole truth. Will you listen to me?”

“By all means,” she answered, taking her fingers off the keys. “Please begin.”

And then I embarked upon my confession. I did it extremely badly and incoherently; but then, to be sure, no one could have done such a thing well. I told her how I had loved Maud Dennison from my boyhood; I explained as well as I could the infatuation which had seized upon me at Taormina; I endeavoured—not very successfully, judging by the ironical smile into which Lady Constance’s lips slowly curved themselves—to convince her that my friendship, my admiration, and my gratitude remained unchanged. “And I never meant to tell you all this,” I declared in conclusion. “I came here

fully intending to say to you what I had said before, that if you would marry me upon my small income I would do my very best to make you happy, and that I believed you would be happier with me than with that blockhead of a Sotheran. I would have done it, too; I would never have said a word——”

At this juncture Lady Constance astonished me by bursting into a peal of laughter. She very rarely laughed in that hearty way; I had not heard her do so more than once or twice in the whole course of our acquaintance; and this made her present merriment seem all the more strange and ill-timed.

“*Vous êtes impayable!*” she exclaimed; “there really is no English adjective that will do for you.” And then she began to laugh again.

“I had no idea that I was so funny,” I observed huffily.

“Of course you had not. What a pity it is that you will never be able to see the joke! Well; go on. You were saying that you would have married me, and never allowed me to suspect your secret agonies.”

I said, "I don't think I need go on. You might find the joke grow tedious on repetition."

"You ought not to grudge me a little laugh," returned Lady Constance. "Why don't you laugh too, now that you have got off scot-free, after running such a frightful risk? But, if you will believe me, I should not have consented to share your name and your small income. No; that happy lot was not for me: another has borne away the prize. My fate is to marry Mr. Sotheran, who, after all, is not such a blockhead as you may suppose. He and I came to terms in a thoroughly business-like manner. If I accept him—which I have not yet done—I am to have plenty of money and a reasonable amount of liberty; but, on the other hand, I have promised to hold no communication with members of secret societies for the future, and to discourage the advances of foolish young men. As both he and I happen to be people of our word, it is probable that we shall get on very fairly well together."

I could not help saying, "You did not always speak of him in that tone."

"What would you have?" she asked more

gravely. "I have looked necessity in the face, and I mean to make the best of it. The man has abilities of a certain kind; I can push him on; possibly I may get him into the Ministry one of these days. Ambition of some sort is an essential to me, and it is better that I should identify myself with my husband. If I have any misgivings, it is not to you that I shall confide them."

She had confided them to me already, as I well remembered. I hated to think of her being chained to this man, whom I suspected of being a bully, and whom I had once heard her call a cur; but I had lost what little right I had ever possessed to remonstrate with her, and I was aware that no remonstrances of mine would cause her to falter in her purpose. She resumed her playing, while I, moving towards the window, looked out upon the stiff parterres and terraces which surrounded the castle, and wished I could feel a little less out of conceit with myself. Some ladies were pacing along the gravel paths; a few of the men had already come back from shooting and had joined them. At any moment our *tête-à-tête* might be interrupted, and, knowing

that it would be our last, I felt a great longing that we might part friends.

Prompted by this desire, I returned to the piano, and was going to speak, when Lady Constance ceased playing, and, drawing an envelope from her pocket, "By-the-by," said she, "here is something that belongs to you. I ought never to have taken it from you. Yet, if I had not, you would have been in love with me still; so possibly I may have rendered you a service without intending it."

The envelope contained a cheque for £2500, which I pocketed in a shamefaced manner. It was my own money, yet the receipt of it made me feel rather like a servant being dismissed with a month's wages. I felt, too, that there was more of truth in her assertion than it was pleasant to admit.

"I ought never to have taken that money at all," Lady Constance repeated, a slight flush mounting into her cheeks. "I am very sorry that I did; but I thought then——"

She did not proceed to explain what it was she had thought then, though I waited some time for her to do so.

"I wonder what you think of me now!" I murmured at last.

"Do you know," said Lady Constance, looking up at me, "I wouldn't press that question, if I were you."

"Ah," I sighed, "I was certain that you were angry with me! And yet, if you only knew how little I could help myself——"

"I assure you I am not the least angry with you," she interrupted; "and I never for one moment supposed that you could help—being what you are. Do you by any chance imagine that I have fallen in love with you? If so, pray disabuse your mind of that notion."

I was really innocent of the coxcombry imputed to me; but if I had been a little older and a little wiser I should hardly have allowed myself to be irritated into making the rejoinder, "You said once that you thought you were beginning to care for me."

Lady Constance's eyes flashed. "It seems that I spoke rather too hastily upon that occasion," she remarked coldly. "Perhaps, after all, it would be doing you a kindness if I were to tell you what I think of you. I took a fancy

to you when we first met, as I dare say you know. You seemed to me to be a nice, manly sort of boy, with a certain independence and originality about you which excited one's interest. Unfortunately, when I came to know you better, I found that you were neither independent nor original. You have no definite ideas; you don't know what you would be at; you have just intelligence enough to spoil a pleasant, stupid fellow, without making a clever one of him. I hope I speak plainly enough?"

"Quite plainly enough, thank you," answered I, summoning up the best imitation of a smile that I could produce. "I didn't expect you to flatter me."

"I am glad of that," observed Lady Constance, "for I can't very well be both flattering and truthful. I was saying that you were neither fish, flesh, nor good red herring. You have no vices that I have been able to discover; but your virtues don't seem to have got much beyond the theoretical stage. You are all negatives. You think truth is a very fine thing, but you have never yet managed to face it. You will always be at the mercy of the first

person who cares to tickle your fancy. What could have been more absurd than that championship of your cousin which you were so proud of? —unless, indeed, it might be your generous offer to saddle yourself with me and my debts upon an income of a thousand a year. If you had been perfectly honest with yourself, you could not have helped seeing that nothing could come out of either of these pretty displays.”

“You have a right to say hard things of me,” I broke in. “Perhaps I might make some sort of defence; but I won’t attempt it. Only I wish that you could say that you forgave me.”

“I very much fear,” continued Lady Constance, “that you will go down to your grave with the conviction that you have thrown me over. Come, I will be quite frank with you. There certainly was a moment when I was not very far from thinking that you and I were destined for one another; to be strictly accurate, I believe there were as many as two or three such moments, with considerable intervals between them. I really believed that you were sincere in your protestations, as sincerity goes, and sometimes you looked so acutely miserable

that you made me ashamed of myself. It was not until that evening at the Opera that I realised what an escape I had had."

"Then why did you not dismiss me at once?" cried I. "It was a long time after that you told me you would refuse Mr. Sotheran if I could show you a certain prospect of my succeeding to Thirlby."

"You are confusing two distinct things," replied Lady Constance calmly. "When I spoke of an escape, I meant that I had escaped the possibility of loving you. Marrying you in preference to Mr. Sotheran was quite another question."

There never was the slightest use in my trying to conceal my thoughts from Lady Constance. She went on now in answer to what I had not said: "Oh, you have had an escape, too—no doubt of it! Nevertheless, it is not to the loss of your property that you owe your escape. I certainly should not have married you against your wish; but you yourself know so little what your wishes are, that I may be excused for having felt some uncertainty upon the point until I saw your face last night. After that you were

perfectly safe. And now," concluded Lady Constance, "I think I have been explicit enough to satisfy anybody."

For my own part, I could have been satisfied with a little more ambiguity; but I only said, "Well, I have been treated with the contempt that I deserve, and there's an end of it. I hope you will not always think quite so hardly of me, though. When we next meet—if we ever do meet again—we shall be in a sort of way like strangers, and probably neither of us will care to refer to the past; but I should like to think that you forgave me."

"Go in peace," answered Lady Constance, laughing. "What you suppose that I have to forgive you for I can't imagine; but, to save time, consider yourself forgiven. As for my thinking hardly of you, I can promise not to do that, for the excellent reason that I shall very soon cease to think of you at all."

And Mrs. Fitzpatrick's opportune entrance at this moment put an end to the last private conversation that I ever held with Lady Constance Milner.



CHAPTER XIV.

I GO TO TEA AT THE RECTORY.

I WAS up and away before breakfast the next morning. It was not only that I dreaded the scrutiny of Lady Constance's cool, contemptuous eyes—though I admit that that alone would have sufficed to drive me out of the house—but I had a far stronger incentive to flight in the eagerness that I felt to lay my recovered liberty at Maud's feet. I raged and fumed at every delay, and if the exasperating intricacies of a system of cross-lines had only admitted of it, I should have rushed off to the Rectory to tell my glad tidings that same evening.

Instead of that, I had to drive up to the Hall, where I found everybody in a stir and the General jubilant, orders having at last reached him to proceed to the Crimea forthwith. In the general excitement caused by this

sudden departure I and my concerns escaped discussion.

Nor was I able to hurry down to the Rectory the first thing on the following day; for the General was leaving for London by the express, and I was bound in common decency to accompany him to the station and see the last of him; but early in the afternoon I set forth at last, and though my heart began to fail me a little as I drew nearer to my destination, I was resolute against any postponement of the fateful hour.

What was rather provoking was to come upon the Rector, working in the garden in his shirt-sleeves, and I fear that I did not respond as cordially as I might have done to his hearty welcome.

"I'm obliged to look after things myself, you see, Charley," he explained. "Must look after things myself, or we should get all behind. The gardener don't like it; but he's off at Yarmouth to-day, fortunately, and I'm just taking the opportunity to do some of his work for him. My phloxes look pretty well, don't they? So the General is off to the wars, eh? I'm sorry for it on Le Marchant's account. If it had been Mrs.

Farquhar, now—but that's absurd, of course. Though I do hear something about ladies going out as nurses," added the Rector, with a faint glimmer of hope.

I said I was afraid Mrs. Farquhar was a little too advanced in life for that sort of thing.

"Ah, well; I suppose so. I'll tell you what you might do for me, Charley: you might just catch hold of these bits of worsted and tie them round some of the zinnias. I want to pick out a few good blooms for seed-bearers, and I'm getting so stiff in the back I can't stoop without howling. I won't keep you above a minute or two."

There was no help for it. I had to go down on my knees and set to work; and the Rector, having secured a listener and an assistant at one stroke, was in no hurry to part with him. After the zinnias had been carefully selected and marked, there were annuals to be sown, chrysanthemums to be tied up and thinned, and various other horticultural operations to be attended to; all of which tasks I performed with as good a grace as might be, while my companion interspersed his directions with a disjointed account

of the workings of parish affairs and many original comments upon the recent dealings of Providence with the Le Marchant family. Some comfort I derived from the incidental information that Maud was out, but would be back in less than an hour. That being so, it was perhaps just as well that I was not called upon to forge any excuse for awaiting her return.

When at last she came she did not say much. "So you have come back, Charley," was her only greeting to me ; but she smiled as she spoke, and I knew—or thought I knew—that she had divined the result of my mission, and rejoiced at it. "If only we could get rid of the Rector!" I thought.

But the Rector, good man, had no idea that he was not wanted. He said we had earned a cup of tea now (though I really don't know what he had done to deserve any refreshment), and that, as the afternoon was so mild, we would have it out in the garden. In vain I cast glances at Maud, who looked a great deal more amused than inclined to give me any help ; and I was fast sinking into a state of apathetic despair when relief appeared in the form of a breathless mes-

senger, who came to say that old Mrs. Sparrow was took very bad, and please would Mr. Denison step over and see her, as the doctor he didn't hold out no hopes of her keeping her "conscience" through the night.

"Dear, dear!" muttered the Rector as he gulped down his hot tea, "this makes four times that Mrs. Sparrow has sent for me in a week. I suppose I must go, though. You see the sort of life that we poor parsons lead, Charley—no time to swallow our food—no time for anything! Well, there's no use in grumbling. Run on, my boy, and tell them I'm coming as fast as I can." And with that he bustled away.

"May blessings rest upon the soul of old Mrs. Sparrow!" I ejaculated devoutly, "and may her conscience depart in peace, if it must depart! I thought this moment would never come."

"What have you to tell me?" asked Maud with some eagerness. "Did you see Lady Constance?"

"I did," answered I; "and she rejected me with scorn, as I told you she would."

Maud looked surprised, and a little incredulous.

lous. "Really?" said she. "I did not expect her to do that. Do you mean that you are rejected absolutely and finally?"

"Absolutely and finally," I repeated, with satisfaction.

"But surely not on account of your poverty?—if one can call it poverty."

"Lady Constance calls it by that name," I answered. "She is going to marry one of the richest men in the North of England now, and she doesn't seem to mind the prospect much; though I know she used to abhor him."

"Then," cried Maud quickly, "she is doing this because you have thrown her over."

"But I didn't throw her over," I protested. "Of course I knew all along that she would never consent to marry me upon such a pittance as I had to offer; but she told me she wouldn't have married me in any case."

"What made her say that?"

"I don't know. At least, I do know partly why she said it. As soon as I arrived she found out—she saw—oh, Maud, can't you guess what it was that she saw?"

"Of course I can guess," answered Maud, a

little coldly. "She saw what any other woman would have seen in her place, that you didn't care for her any more. But I think you ought to have tried to conceal it."

"So I did," said I, feeling rather ashamed of myself; "I quite thought that I had concealed it; but she is one of those people who know more about you at a glance than you know yourself. She saw something else too," I added, after a short pause.

"What else?" asked Maud; and this time there was a distinct sound of anger in her voice, while her brows drew together ominously.

"Don't look at me like that!" I exclaimed. "I was a little afraid that you might be displeased at my speaking so soon. But then I thought you would understand—that you would be above caring whether I told you that I loved you now, or next week, or next month. Besides, you know it already. You believe that I have always loved you; don't you, Maud?"

I leant across the tea-table, which separated me from Maud, and looked into her face anxiously. She was still frowning; her great gray eyes were opened wide; it seemed to me

that she was trying hard to look indignant, but could not. All of a sudden the corners of her mouth twitched convulsively; she caught her breath; finally, to my great chagrin, she turned away, and went off into a fit of irrepressible laughter.

"What *are* you laughing at?" I exclaimed, with some pardonable irritation; for really it was more than flesh and blood could stand to be treated in this extraordinary way upon two consecutive occasions. It had not been pleasant to be turned into ridicule by Lady Constance, but it was a thousand times worse to meet with such a reception from Maud. "This may be a joke—it may be an excellent joke; but for the life of me I can't see it," I declared.

"I wish you wouldn't make me laugh!" cried Maud, with a petulant stamp of her foot. "I don't want to laugh. I think it is horrid of you to behave in this way, and if you thought I should be displeased, you were quite right. I wish I could make you understand how—how disgusted I am! But it *was* rather funny of you to say that, wasn't it?" she added, with a renewed tremble in her voice.

"To say what?" I inquired.

"Why, that you had always loved me. And you looked so serious about it, too," she went on; "that was what upset me—as serious as if it had been true."

"Perhaps," returned I with dignity, "that may be in some measure accounted for by the fact that it is true."

"Oh, Charley! have you forgotten that you wanted me to marry George Warren not so long ago? Have you forgotten all that you told me about Lady Constance in London? My memory is not so short."

"I can't help it," I answered. "I don't deny, and don't wish to deny, that I have fancied myself in love with Lady Constance; but that was nothing more nor less than a fit of temporary insanity. I can't give any explanation of what I said or did while it lasted—who can be accountable for his actions when he is not in his right mind?—but I do ask you to believe that I have never really ceased to love you."

"You ask a little too much," said Maud drily. She had become grave again now, and had pushed her chair back, so that she was further away

from me. "You must not expect to be taken seriously, Charley," she went on. "Very likely you think you are speaking the truth now; but I don't see why you should not think that something quite different is the truth in a few months from now."

"You won't believe!" I exclaimed despairingly. "You wouldn't believe long ago, when I told you that I should never love any woman but you——"

"It seems that I was right there," she interrupted.

"No, you were not right," cried I; "you were wrong! I loved you then as I love you now, with all my heart and soul. I can't love you now more than I loved you then. And, perhaps, if you had given me a word of hope two years ago, I shouldn't have made such an idiot of myself as I have done."

"Can't you understand that I might not have been able to give you a word of hope even if I had believed you?"

Yes; I understood that. And yet I could hardly believe that, after this long and perilous voyage, I was to founder in port. I said nothing

for a long time, half hoping that she would speak again ; but she remained silent, her hands clasped loosely in her lap, and her eyes fixed upon the horizon. There was no sign of agitation in her face or in her attitude, and her perfect quiescence smote me with a conviction more cruel than any words could have conveyed.

“Is this to be the end?” I gasped out at length. “Is there never to be any hope for me?”

“I am sorry,” answered Maud briefly ; and then she turned, and I suppose something in my face must have touched her, for she added in a kinder tone : “I am really sorry, Charley ; but I can’t say what you wish. You know how fond I am of you ; I would do anything for you that I could—except that one thing. I don’t want ever to speak about this again ; so I had better say now that your coming so soon has made no difference. I think you would have shown better taste if you had waited a little longer ; but my answer would have been just the same if you had.”

“But you say you are fond of me,” I pleaded, catching at any straw in my distress. “How

can you tell that you might not come to love me some day? It seems to me as if you must—when I love you so. Won't you give me leave to try?"

"No," answered Maud firmly; "I could not love you as one ought to love one's husband. You know——" But here she checked herself, saying, "I don't wish to hurt you."

"You need not be afraid of doing that," I answered, with a grim laugh. "It would puzzle anybody to hurt me much now."

"Well, I was going to say," Maud resumed, after hesitating a little longer, "that there is an old threadbare maxim about love being impossible without respect."

"It is not confirmed by what one sees every day," I remarked.

"Still, there must be some truth in a saying which has been repeated so many thousands of times. At all events, I think most women feel in that way."

"I doubt it," said I; "but never mind. You have no respect for me, of course."

Maud shook her head. "Not enough, I am afraid; you are too changeable. I shouldn't be

happy with you ; nor would you be happy with me after the first. We must say good-bye now. I am going to Surrey to stay with the Savilles in a day or two ; and I hope when we meet again all this will be forgotten."

"Forgotten !" I echoed ; "I shall never forget and never change. But what is the good of protesting ?—you won't believe me."

We stood facing one another for a few moments in silence ; then, yielding to an uncontrollable impulse, I caught her suddenly in my arms, kissed her forehead, and hurried away, without another word.

I turned and looked back as I passed through the gate. She was standing as I had left her, with a grave, sad face. She did not seem to have resented my momentary brutality ; but, somehow, that only confirmed my conviction that she was lost to me for ever.





CHAPTER XV.

I CHANGE THE SCENE.

GREAT misfortunes are like mortal wounds in that they seldom cause much suffering at first, and for some time after the destruction of all my hopes I managed to preserve an outward equanimity which was certainly not the result of any exceptional strength of mind. I stayed out my month at Thirlby ; I potted about the place with my uncle, as of old ; I initiated Jimmy into the rudiments of field sports, and listened patiently to the religious disquisitions of Mrs. Farquhar, who had now once more taken me into favour. But I had not been long in London again before the blackness of despair settled down upon me. I found myself without any object in life, with nothing whatever to look forward to, and—as I rather ungratefully imagined—without a single friend.

Having few acquaintances in town at that season of the year, and being a great deal alone, I took to brooding over my troubles, and began soon to put to myself some of those pleasant questions to which no answer has ever been discovered, or ever will be until the whole business comes to an end.

Most of us, I suppose, have passed through some such dark periods, and most of us have come out of them with a more or less cheerful acquiescence in the mystery of life, and a conviction that it is, upon the whole, wiser to struggle for existence than to try and find out what existence is, or why it should be struggled for. Unfortunately, the labours of a Foreign Office clerk are hardly severe enough in themselves to exclude "obstinate questionings." I don't mean to say that my speculations were very abstruse, or that I consulted any authorities, philosophical or theological, with a view to gaining more light (though, to be sure, I might have done so and got but scant comfort for my pains); but I reached the point of persuading myself that I had neither hope nor belief, neither duties nor pleasures, in the world; and when a man

gets as far as that, ugly conclusions are apt to stare him in the face. My uncle, who knew of the disappointment that I had had, and who must have guessed at my condition of mind from my letters, very wisely and kindly left me alone. No doubt I should have rejected any consolation that he could have offered me ; but I well remember how often I accused him in my thoughts of having accepted Jimmy as a wholly efficient substitute for me, and how in this I found an additional argument in favour of cutting short a life which was of no use either to its owner or to anybody else.

It is easy to look back with a smile now upon all this crude temerity ; yet it may be remembered that within the space of a few weeks I had been virtually banished from my home, deceived by my friend, and laughed to scorn both by the woman whom I loved and by her whose good opinion I still greatly prized ; and, perhaps, charitable persons may be disposed to excuse a young fellow who, under such sad circumstances, fancied that the world was a poor place to live in.

I did not, however, attempt to cut my throat

or to drown myself in the Thames, nor did I enlist, as I had occasional wild thoughts of doing when the news of Alma, Balaclava, and Inkermann came successively to brighten the gloom of the winter days. Such remedies were too heroic for one in my state of nerveless despondency, and it is probable that I should have remained where I was from sheer lack of energy to move elsewhere, had not a friendly letter reached me one morning from the other side of the world. George Warren wrote in good spirits, and made only indirect allusions to the cause of his exile. He had already succeeded beyond his anticipations, he said; he liked the life, and, although he did not see his way to realising immediate wealth, he considered the prospect fair and sure, and only regretted that he had so limited an amount of capital to work upon. "If anything should occur to disgust you with an effete civilisation," he concluded, "you could not do better than come out here and join me. I wish you would! The interior of New South Wales hasn't much to boast of in the way of society, it is true; but I could promise you plenty of occupation and some novel experiences."

George can have little suspected, when he penned these careless words, in what sober earnest they would be accepted by the person to whom they were addressed. Occupation and novelty!—were not these the things of which I stood in need? And why, since I was so weary of my present existence, should I not make a fresh start and begin a new life in a new world? I jumped at the idea. I wrote to my uncle, telling him of the step which I meditated, and received (somewhat to my surprise, I own) a cordial approval of it from him by return of post. It only remained for me to let George know that he might expect me, to retire from the service which I had done so little to adorn, and to purchase such an outfit as my future avocations appeared to require.

These and other preliminaries occupied a good deal of time, and in the carrying out of them my spirits insensibly rose. When the date fixed for my departure drew near, my uncle came up to London to give me, as he said, the benefit of his advice upon the subject of sheep-farming; but in reality, I think, that we might have a few undisturbed days together before we parted. In

those few days the cloud which had recently come between us—and which had been of my raising, not his—was finally dispelled. I knew then that his love for me had never diminished, and that there were no troubles of mine which his kind heart did not share. I saw too—though he never said so—that my going away was a sore trial to the dear old man ; but I am afraid it did not occur to me that I might be doing rather a selfish thing in leaving him.

My wish was to embark without paying a farewell visit to Thirlby ; but this my uncle would not hear of. “ Miss Dennison is away from home,” he said, divining the cause of my reluctance ; “ but the Rector would like to say good-bye to you, and so would Bunce—not to speak of my mother and Jimmy. You must be prepared to receive a round scolding from Bunce, who will not be convinced that New South Wales is anything but a penal settlement, and thinks that your going there is nothing short of a stigma upon the family.”

However, when the time came, Bunce did not scold me, but only shook his head and looked utterly woe-begone, and couldn't get out a word.

And Bunce was not the only old friend whose face made my heart ache that day. I don't know how many kind people came to shake me by the hand, and wish me God speed. If I had had some hard thoughts while I had been alone in London, they were all gone now, and it was only by dint of the most obstinate and unnatural sprightliness that I was able to avoid publicly disgracing myself. My uncle came to the station with me alone, and at the last moment he put his head in at the carriage window, saying, with a break in his voice, "Charley, my boy, you'll come back and see me once before I die, won't you?"

I couldn't answer him, but I nodded; and then the train moved on, and his poor wistful face was lost to me. After all, it is not such an easy matter to say good-bye.

I don't think it was before we were well out to sea and the gray headland of the Lizard was fast fading into mist that I admitted to myself the loss of one last vague shred of hope. "She had only to say a word," I thought sadly, "and I would have given up everything. But if she couldn't say it, I suppose it was better that she should stay away."



CHAPTER XVI.

HOME AGAIN.

LET not patient readers fear that, at this advanced stage of the proceedings, they are going to be introduced to sheep-washing and gold-washing, bushrangers, damper, and bluegums, or asked to follow the chase of the bounding kangaroo. The endurance of the patient shall not be taxed much further ; and, indeed, I have found by experience that there are many persons who do not take an intelligent interest in any of the above subjects. I shall probably give more satisfaction by dismissing three years in as few sentences as may be, and hastening towards the point at which all curiosity with regard to my career may be supposed to subside.

Those three years were years of tolerably constant physical labour, of some occasional excitement, and of fair prosperity. Circumstances did

not compel me to face the hardships which most of those who seek their fortune at the Antipodes must be prepared to encounter; yet my experiences were not smooth. They taught me, as they could hardly fail to do, some salutary lessons; and if I returned to my native land, like the oft-quoted Bourbons, having forgotten nothing, I hope I may say that I did not resemble them in having learnt nothing.

George Warren received me with as hearty a welcome as I could have desired, but, after listening to my story, did not disguise his conviction that I should be taking my passage home again before the twelvemonth was out. He obstinately refused to believe that Maud's rejection of me was intended to be final, and, when I declared that he did not know what he was talking about, reminded me that he had at least understood my feelings upon a former occasion better than I had done myself, and that, having been right in my case, there was a slight presumption in favour of his being right as to hers. Nevertheless, he was compelled, in the sequel, to modify his opinion, and to confess that both Miss Dennison and I were more steadfast than he had imagined us.

Maud corresponded with him pretty regularly. Letters from her reached our station every now and again—letters which George always allowed me to read, and which, long and kindly as they were, gave no ground for supposing that the writer regretted what she had done. I well recollect how, as time went on, the sight of an envelope addressed in her handwriting used to make my heart sink, and how I used to exclaim, “Now it has come! She is writing to tell you that she is engaged to some fellow.”

“Well—I don’t know, I’m sure,” George would reply, opening and perusing his letter in that exasperatingly deliberate manner of his, while I ground my teeth with impatience; and then, having fully mastered its contents, he would hand it over to me, remarking, with a smile, “Not this time.”

He himself seemed to have put entirely away from him the day-dreams in which he had once made bold to indulge, and was disinclined to refer to them. On being pressed, he said—Well, he didn’t think he should ever fall in love with anybody else; but falling in love was not the only thing that made life worth having. George

always took a very moderate view of the share of happiness that was due to him. He was laying by money now, and sending home periodical supplies to replenish the family exchequer. Probably he thought that he was fulfilling his destiny more satisfactorily in this way than by achieving less prosaic successes; and, for aught I know, he may have been right.

As for me, I was without such sources of self-approval; and so, when three long years had passed away, and my uncle had been urging me to pay him a visit, lest (as he said) I should "put off too long," I considered myself fairly entitled to turn away my thoughts from wool for a time. I returned to England with no intention of remaining there (for I had become attached to the free Australian life—perhaps also a little to the prospect of growing rich); but it was not only to see my dear old man again that I undertook the voyage. Three years of constancy must surely count for something, I thought; and she was still unmarried—well, we should see. If the worst came to the worst, I had always an occupation to fall back upon and a friend to smoke a pipe with

when the day's work was done. One must not be too exacting.

I had been unable to let my uncle know the precise date on which he might expect me, and I did not think it necessary to send him a telegram on my arrival; the consequence of which was that when I alighted at Thirlby Station I found no sort of vehicle in waiting. For that, however, I was prepared. I told the station-master, who had recognised me with a broad grin, to send my luggage up in a cart, and set out to walk home.

When I reached the bridge over the dike that connects Thirlby Broad with Horsey Mere I came to a halt, and remained for a long time leaning over the parapet, and staring at the expanse of still water with that foolish surprise at finding the face of Nature unaltered which one so frequently experiences at such times. I was wondering whether Maud was at the Rectory, and where I should first meet her, when, all of a sudden, I saw her emerge with slow steps from the belt of trees where she and I had often walked together in the old days. She sauntered along the bank, unconscious of being observed,

pausing every now and then to kick a stone into the water, while I watched her eagerly. At last, when she had advanced to within a few yards of me, I could keep silence no longer, and, in a voice which trembled a little, despite all my efforts at self-control, I said: "How do you do, Miss Dennison?"

"Charley!" she exclaimed. And the next moment I was holding both her hands, and looking into the most beautiful eyes in the world, which met mine with a glad light of welcome shining in them.

"And are you glad to see me back?" I asked, after we had exchanged the usual hurried questions and replies. It was rather a silly thing to say; but in sophisticated states of society a man can seldom express his thoughts freely.

"Of course I am glad; everybody will be glad," answered Maud. "And I suppose, perhaps, you yourself are not sorry to be at home again; though Mr. Le Marchant says you don't mean to stay long. And now tell me all about Australia."

"Oh, there's nothing to tell," I said. "I'll give you a full account of it some other time, if

you wish ; but just at present it is your part to tell me about home. First of all, how is my uncle ? ”

“ Perfectly well, I am glad to say, only rather excited about your return. I have just been to see him, and, of course, we talked about nothing but you. Don’t you think you ought to go to him at once, Charley ? ”

“ Yes ; I will in a minute—or five minutes, perhaps. So you have just been with the old man ? ”

“ Yes ; we have become great allies, I must tell you. I have seen a good deal more of him since Mrs. Farquhar’s death, and I don’t wonder now at your always having been so enthusiastic about him.”

“ I am very glad you are friends,” said I. “ Poor old Mrs. Farquhar ! I suppose nobody can regret her very much.”

“ I don’t know,” said Maud. “ Mr. Le Marchant did, I think. She softened down a great deal after—after all that trouble, you know, and latterly I grew almost fond of her myself ; though I can’t say that I ever understood her.”

“ And Jimmy ? ” I asked.

"Jimmy is flourishing. He is at Eton now, you know. In the holidays he sometimes condescends to ride with me, and take me out fishing. He is a little like what you used to be; only——"

"Only not so nice?" I suggested.

"Well, that is a matter of opinion," answered Maud. "Some people might say that he was nicer. He is certainly cleverer."

"But George Warren always maintained that I had great undeveloped talents," I observed.

Then we spoke a little of George and other friends, and by-and-by Maud asked me whether I still kept up my acquaintance with Lady Constance Sotheran; to which I replied that I had not so much as heard her name since the day when I had bidden her farewell in Yorkshire.

"Yet she has become rather notorious," Maud remarked.

"Very likely," answered I; "but her notoriety has not penetrated to the Southern Hemisphere. In what way does it display itself?"

"In all sorts of ways. She entertains on a large scale, of course; but, besides that, she heads endless charities and takes up out-of-the-

way abuses, which she generally contrives to get reformed. It seems that she has the power of making everybody follow her lead, and I believe she does a great deal of good. Last spring I saw her several times in London. She looked very much bored, I thought ; but she always did look that, did she not ? ”

“ And what about her husband ? ”

“ Oh, I should think he was supremely contented ; at any rate, he ought to be. They say he refused to join the last Ministry because she would not allow him to accept anything less than a seat in the Cabinet. You narrowly escaped having greatness thrust upon you, you see.”

I made no reply, and we walked on for some distance in silence. Whether the direction which our steps took was determined by the conscious or unconscious will of either of us I cannot say ; but certain it is that we found ourselves eventually upon the brink of that reedy creek which had already been the scene of two memorable interviews between us. For my part, I recognised at the same moment the fact and the impossibility of avoiding some allusion to it. It

looked as though Fate had guided me thither ; yet I shrank from risking everything upon the very first day of my return. That day at least, I thought, should be unclouded ; nay, would it not be far better that all clouds should be averted up to the last moment, and that I should reserve to myself the power of supplementing my failure by a speedy retreat ? For doubtless it was more likely than not that I should fail. Moreover, I felt sure that if Maud had had any present thought of relenting, she would not have suffered herself to be led to this especial spot.

Therefore I only said : " So the old punt is gone at last."

" Not quite gone," answered Maud. " If you bend down, you will see its sides sticking up out of the mud under water. It sank one day last winter, to my great regret, and I was only a little consoled by remembering that I had had the luck not to be sitting in it at the time. Bunce absolutely refused to fish it up for me again. He said he was blessed if he'd help me to get the rheumatics by sitting in such plaguy damp places ; so since then I have had to make the best of a willow-stump."

"Then you do come here sometimes?" said I interrogatively.

"Very often," she answered. "I am fond of the place. It reminds me of the days of my youth."

I laughed at the implication that the days of her youth were over; but she rejoined gravely: "I am five-and-twenty, and I feel two-and-fifty. Lives like mine have nothing youthful about them. All my friends are old people, and all my pursuits now are very much what they will be twenty or thirty years hence, if I live so long."

"And you are contented with such a life?"

"Who is altogether contented?" she returned. "Not even Mr. Sotheran, perhaps, if one could probe the secret recesses of his heart. My life suits me well enough. I have grown rather fond of parish work, which I used to hate, and all the people in the village allow me to tyrannise over them now. Even Mrs. Bunce admits that I don't mean any harm, though I can't persuade her to come out of Ebenezer. Every now and then I have a dinner-party at the Welbys or a ball on the other side of the county by way of dissipation, and once or twice a year I go to stay with

my aunt, Mrs. Saville, for a time. And so the days go on. They are not bad days, taking them all in all."

"But the old days were better," I suggested.

"Yes," she answered with a slight hesitation; and then, more briskly—"yes; the old days were better, no doubt. That is why I like to be reminded of my youth."

It was easy to foresee the inevitable issue of such a dialogue as this. I felt so certain that I should not be able to maintain the reserve which I had imposed upon myself that I suddenly determined to throw myself upon my companion's mercy, lest a worse thing should befall me. "Maud," I began hurriedly, "I have something to say to you; only please don't answer me. Will you promise to give me no answer yet?"

She replied composedly, "Certainly, if you wish it. But why am I not to be allowed to speak?"

"Because it would spoil everything," I returned. "Because I am going away again soon; because I want to enjoy these few weeks—who knows whether we shall ever have such another quiet time together?—and because I want you

and my uncle to enjoy them too. All that would be impossible if I knew at the very outset that you could never care for me. When I went away you told me that I was changeable, and I couldn't contradict you then; but I don't think you can accuse me of being changeable any more. Unhappily, my having loved you so long is no reason for your being able to love me; though perhaps it might entitle me to ask for a short period of probation. It is not a very unreasonable request to make, considering how much I must gain or lose by your decision. I want you, if you will, to grant me this small privilege, and I will engage, on my part, not to mention the subject again until quite the end of the time. I didn't mean to mention it now; only I found it impossible to hold my tongue."

"May I not say one word?" asked Maud.

"No!—no!" I exclaimed vehemently, holding up my hand to stop her; "you mustn't breathe a syllable—you mustn't even give me a look! Don't you see that the slightest sign can only mean yes or no?"

I was, nevertheless, inconsistent enough to interrogate her face anxiously; but I gained

little by this incipient breach of contract. Her expression was quite inscrutable, and I had to content myself with the negative encouragement that it did not seem to indicate "displeasure. Perhaps, if it indicated anything at all, it was rather a faint degree of amusement than any other emotion.

"Very well," she said at length; "but this makes conversation a little difficult. What are we to talk about now? Suppose you take this opportunity of giving me some of your colonial experiences."

She had apparently forgotten that nearly half an hour before she had urged me to lose no time in seeking out my uncle; but I, for the first time in my life, was anxious to leave her. Her composure did not strike me as a good omen, nor did I feel capable at that moment of doing justice to the attractions of Australian life and scenery. However, to show that I intended to observe my engagement, I did my best to carry out her wishes in a cheerful spirit, and she declared that my rather halting and disconnected descriptions interested her greatly. She had seated herself upon the willow-stump already alluded to while I was

speaking, and after she had asked a great many questions, which I answered to the best of my ability, she rose, saying :

“ Now it is high time for us to depart to our respective homes. Do you know, Charley, I think I should rather like to see Australia.”

“ Should you ? ” returned I absently. “ I don’t suppose you ever will.”

“ No, not unless——” Here she paused for a moment ; and then, a sudden smile breaking out upon her lips and in her eyes, she added——“ unless you will take me back with you.”

* * * * *

Readers of proper feeling will, I trust, appreciate the above row of asterisks. There are occasions upon which all discreet persons instinctively turn their discreet backs, and I shall certainly not narrate in detail what took place immediately after the astonishing speech just recorded had been uttered. I may mention, however, that Maud now avers that she loved me before I ever thought of loving her, and that up to this present time of writing I have never been able to convince her that I was not once very deeply in love with Lady Constance Milner.

I think my uncle was almost as delighted as I was when he heard my good news; though his delight, as was natural, expressed itself more soberly. I was glad that Jimmy was away at school, and that we two were able to have that long happy evening alone together. I look back upon it now with a great tenderness and regret and gratitude. I hear again the sound of the kind, gentle voice that has been so long silent; I recall the quick sympathy, the self-forgetfulness, the generosity, which made my old man father and friend to me, and I ask myself how I can ever have had the folly and temerity to be a pessimist. The average excellence of humanity is not increased because one insignificant unit has been fortunate enough to spend the greater part of his life with good people; but the judgment of that fortunate unit must perforce be affected thereby; and if, at this time of day, I am inclined to think too well of my fellow-creatures, I can but apologise respectfully for the weakness.

Before we went to bed that night, my uncle said he had a wedding-present for Miss Maud which he might as well hand over into my care; and then unlocking the safe, which stood in a

corner of his study, he took out an old leather-covered box, the aspect of which was familiar to me.

“Good Heavens !” I exclaimed ; “how did you get hold of my mother’s diamonds ?”

“By right of purchase,” answered my uncle, smiling. “Jacobson was scandalised at the idea of your parting with family jewels—indeed, I am not at all sure that he didn’t suspect you of stealing them—and he very properly wrote off post-haste to tell me what had occurred, and to ask whether I had any wishes in the matter.”

“And you bought them back ! Why didn’t you tell me ? Oh, surely,” I exclaimed, a sudden light breaking in upon me, “that was not why you sold Deepham Farm !”

“Well, you see, I had not £2500 by me,” replied my uncle, “and it seemed a pity that the jewels should be lost. But you need not distress yourself about the land. Jimmy will never miss it, and Sir Digby not only gave me more than it was worth, but was so pleased with his bargain that he has not ceased chuckling over it yet.”

“But Lady Constance—— I mean I got back the £2500,” said I ; “and I might have bought

the diamonds again myself, only somehow I thought I should never want them."

"Ah, I was more provident," remarked my uncle. "It seemed to me to be within the bounds of possibility that you might some day have a wife ; so I prepared myself for that emergency. And now I want you to find out whether Maud likes the old-fashioned settings, or whether she would prefer to have the stones re-arranged."

I was beginning to thank him; but he would not allow me to do that, saying that his present was to my bride, not to me, and that, in his opinion, I should always be his creditor.

He never alluded again to the fact that I was no longer heir to Thirlby; but he tried in many ways to make up to me—not for an injustice; it was not that, or it would never have been committed by him—but for what some might consider a stroke of ill fortune. By how much I was his debtor, instead of his creditor, no one except myself, perhaps, can rightly judge. During the last three months that I was with him I may have expressed a part of the gratitude that I felt, and I know that I often said more than he wished me to say; but alas! of the

gratitude which expresses itself in actions, not in words, I fear I was less profuse. I had set my heart upon returning to Australia; I dreaded the inactive life of home; I may even, without acknowledging it to myself, have dreaded a little the prospect of seeing another man grow up to the inheritance which was once to have been mine. And, though the Rector urged me strongly to settle down in Norfolk among my own belongings, I turned a deaf ear to his entreaties, and my uncle would not say a word to second them.

As for Maud, she inaugurated then a system from which she has never since departed, and which she never fails to condemn when she sees it in operation elsewhere. I very much doubt whether she had any desire at all to see New South Wales; but I am afraid that even now, if I were to tell her that I had a fancy for ending my days in Greenland, she would set about buying furs and laying in stores of tallow with an air of cheerful anticipation.

So when the time came, she and I embarked together, telling those whom we were leaving, and whom we never saw again, that we should certainly return ere long.



CHAPTER XVII.

THE WIND UP.

My wife and I went out to Australia for two or three years, and have returned at last after an absence of a quarter of a century. The pursuit of wealth, some vicissitudes of fortune, family cares, and finally the severance of all home ties, combined to detain us in the land of our adoption until we were able to leave it for good.

My uncle fell asleep in his arm-chair in the library one evening, and never woke again. When morning came, and they found him lying back there with a smile upon his face, he had been dead some hours. And in the same year the Rector followed his old friend scarcely less suddenly and peacefully. This last sad news reached us just as we were making preparations for a visit to Europe, and caused us to abandon our intention. My wife, who had been growing

restless and anxious to see her father again, did not care to undertake the voyage after the chief object of it had been removed ; and if her loss cost her many hours of unhappiness, she was careful to conceal them from me, lest I should reproach myself more than I had already done, and to dry her eyes whenever she thought that I was looking at her.

“Untouched with any shade of years
May those kind eyes for ever dwell !”

May the light of faith, of hope, of charity that is in them remain undimmed until they close at last !

My partnership with George Warren was dissolved almost immediately after I rejoined him. I don't know whether he found it more difficult than he had expected to live in close proximity to Maud ; but I can hardly believe that his anxiety to try his fortune in Victoria was prompted solely by that greed for gold to which he himself ascribed it. Be that as it may, he departed for the younger colony, and we did not see him again until he returned to sheep-farming in New South Wales, bringing with him a wife whose many admirable qualities must have enabled him to look back without regret upon the

disappointments of former years. George made money somewhat more rapidly than I did, and has now been for a long time settled at Hailsham in the enjoyment of a comfortable income, the bliss of paternity, and a mind conscious of rectitude.

I am told that Lady Constance Sotheran is seldom seen in London society nowadays. Some years ago, when a certain celebrated patriot visited England, she took him under her especial protection, giving balls in his honour, at which he appeared in a remarkable costume, and driving him about the streets in her carriage to the admiration of the British public. But this, so far as I am aware, is the sole instance on record of her reverting to those sympathies for which she was once so famous ; and, as the patriot in question was an honoured and pensioned patriot, with whom Kings and Princes were accustomed to shake hands, such a temporary lapse from the path of sober respectability was, perhaps, not objected to by Lady Constance's husband. Mr. Sotheran is now old, feeble, and partly paralysed. He filled the office of President of the Board of Trade in a short-lived Administration ; since which time he has been heard of no more in

political life. His wife is said to nurse him in his declining years with exemplary solicitude.

And here, to finish up with, is a cutting from an East Norfolk paper:—"We understand that a marriage has been arranged, and will shortly take place, between James Le Marchant, of Thirlby Hall, Esq., J.P., and Maud, only daughter of Mr. Charles Maxwell, whose large fortune, realised in Australia, will, it is to be supposed, eventually pass to the bride-elect. Some of our readers may remember that Mr. Maxwell's own boyhood was spent in the interesting old edifice which is to be his daughter's future home."

Ah, yes! "some of our readers;" but not many of them.

In five-and-twenty years *on a le temps d'oublier*; and with such a very handsome, clever, and dashing personage as James Le Marchant, Esq., J.P., to represent the present, the few surviving contemporaries of Mr. Maxwell's boyhood are not likely to trouble their heads about the past. Jimmy assures me that he is the happiest man in England; and really I don't know why he shouldn't be. Both his parents died long ago—so long ago that I doubt whether he ever saw them again after that melan-

choly morning which witnessed their departure from Thirlby. He has never mentioned them to me; nor have I cared to introduce the subject.

The other day, knowing that he was safe in London with my wife and daughter, I went down on the sly to have an undisturbed look at the "interesting old edifice" which he inhabits, and to visit the church where all that was mortal of my dear old uncle lies. His memory has passed away, as the memory of most of us will soon pass, and there is no one left now to discuss his eccentricities, his strange love of solitude, his supposed vacillations, his misfortunes, and the wise or unwise way in which he dealt with them. A monument above the spot where his body rests displays a conventional eulogium to such as care to read it; but I think the inscription he would have liked best, and which would describe him with the simplest truth, is that which a certain great and modest man once chose for himself:—"Here lies one who tried to do his duty."

THE END.

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